

Chapter 1

The car ride home from King's Crossing was tense, to say the absolute minimum. Vernon was an odd shade, almost flickering between his usual puce and a pasty white, neither of which was a good colour on the man. "Think they can threaten me, do they?" was all Harry could hear, repeatedly.

When they returned to Number four Privet Drive, Harry learned something of what Uncle Vernon had decided. They entered the house, where Vernon immediately took the cage that Hedwig resided in and headed toward his den.

"Where are you going with Hedwig?" Harry demanded.

"Don't take that tone with me, boy!" his uncle sneered in his face. "You need this owl to communicate with the others. So, I'm keeping her with me until you go back to that foul school full of freaks. I'd stop you from going if I could, but that's not a possibility, since they'll come to collect you in September. What you're going to do is write a short note to them every other day, in front of me, and we'll send the owl out to deliver it. She'll come back and we'll repeat it until the summer is over."

"What if I refuse?" Harry balked insolently.

"Makes no difference to me. I can snap the owl's neck right now, or wait until the summer is over. You do it my way, or she dies. As simple as that."

"What if I send her off and tell her not to return?"

"Then I think you'll dislike the treatment I give you. There are things I can do to you, Harry, that won't show up in a search." He grinned. "Don't think I won't, boy. Your wizards don't understand the simplest things about the real world, and I guarantee that I can outsmart them."

"You wouldn't dare," Harry said, turning white.

"You willing to bet the life of your owl on that? I know you care for the beast."

Harry looked at his uncle, and then looked at his aunt and cousin. Indifference from her, and the desire to snap Hedwig's neck himself from Dudley. "You win. I do it your way," Harry acquiesced.

"Of course I win, boy. That's why I do so well at sales. I always win, and I always will. It would do you well to remember that."

Inside the house, he was given his first surprise. "Trunk in the cupboard, boy."

"But I need to study!" Vernon moved his hand to the door to Hedwig's cage. "Fine. In the cupboard. Will I be sleeping in there as well?" he snarled.

Vernon's free hand came out and smashed against the side of Harry's head. "Don't you take that tone with me, boy! Now that you mention it, though, that sounds like a good idea. Give Dudley his second room back."

Harry staggered at the force of the blow to his head. He opened the cupboard and placed his trunk inside, bending down to find the best possible placement for his sleeping arrangements that night. *Maybe I can get the bedroom back if I watch the tone around him for a week or so.*

He spent the week learning exactly what the Dursleys had in mind for him this summer. The threats to Vernon had caused the exact opposite effect from what the Order members had expected. They had expected him to be cowed, and to give Harry greater freedom; instead, they had set Vernon to calculating, and had returned Harry to his pre-Hogwarts days.

At five AM his first day back, he was awakened by Vernon opening his door and dragging him out of bed. "You don't have the time to be wasting around in bed, boy!" he roared in Harry's face. "Get

downstairs and make the kitchen ready for breakfast. I expect the food on the table at six AM!"

Harry staggered into the kitchen, where he was greeted with the sight of the dishes that Vernon had dirtied during the night. The man liked his midnight snacks, which is why he was still a huge man. He had intentionally dirtied far more plates than he usually did, and Harry immediately got the message. Luckily, he had practice with cleaning quickly, so in roughly half an hour, he had the sink clear, and was in the process of preparing eggs and bacon when Vernon came into the dining area. "Hmph," was all he grunted. Quickly, Harry finished the cooking and had the bacon and eggs on the table, and turned to make toast when he felt Vernon's foot shoot out to trip him. He fell to the ground, the pan making a loud clanging noise just before Harry's left hand came down in it. Before he could pull his hand out of the still sizzling pan, Vernon was holding him down. "This is a taste of what I'm going to do to you, freak. You won't be going back to that school this September, if I have my way. Once you're eighteen, you're gone, but until then, you're mine." He finally let Harry up, and Harry looked at his hand. There were second degree burns on the palm of his hand, and he was fairly certain that the fingertips had sustained third degree burns.

Knowing his uncle, however, he carefully picked up the pan and put it in the sink, one-handed. He scrubbed it as best he could, placing it in the drain, and then carefully washed his burnt hand with Vernon watching. He was starting to shiver slightly, but he turned and walked into the bathroom in order to finish dressing his wound.

"I'll have none of that, boy! No need wasting things on the likes of you. You can just wave that wand of yours ..." He smirked. "Oh, that's right, you can't, can you? You'll just have to deal with it, then, I suppose. Now get dressed, get outside and mow the lawn!"

"The neighbours won't like you very much, Uncle Vernon, if I start too early. Even if you blame it on me, they'll complain that you should have tighter rein on me."

"You dare talk back to me, boy?" Vernon roared. "Get out there!"

Harry pulled some clothes from the trunk and stepped into the water closet to dress. By six-thirty, the mower was running, and he had been hit in the head at least once by an old boot rather expertly thrown. When the lawn was done, he put the mower back in the shed, wiping the blood from his hand off the handle with his shirt. He stepped into the house and was immediately shrieked at by Petunia. "What do you think you're doing, boy, dripping blood on my nice clean floors? Go wash that off and then wash these floors again, since you dirtied them." She stalked off to the living room, where she sat down to watch her television programmes.

Harry's attempts at cleaning the floor were hampered by the extreme pain he felt from accidentally getting chlorine bleach on the open wound. After five years of dealing with Voldemort, he could handle this, but it was not an easy thing. He grimaced and finished the job, and carefully cleaned the tools of the trade as well, wincing when he was forced to wring the mop with his hands.

I can see where this is going to go. Imagine if I manage to make it back to Hogwarts alive with my hand in this condition. Actually, thank God for the bleach! That should have cleaned the wound some. I may have to try to do that on a daily basis. He limped over to his 'new' room, and climbed inside to hold his hand in pain for a time. His eyes fell on something he had scrawled on the wall nearest the door half his lifetime ago:

H. Pottr's

Room

Age 8

He closed his mind, and tried to ignore the pain. He tried to focus on anything that might help him. His mind flitted past his friends – Ron, his impetuous friend, constantly in arguments with Hermione. Hermione, his genius best friend, her beautiful chestnut hair still as bushy as when he'd first met her. He could see her studying something in the Common Room, one strand of hair out of place, hanging down in front of her face. He always wanted to walk over and brush it back behind her ear, but that would be too forward, so he simply watched her as she studied. *I can never admit it, but*

she's the reason I never do well on my essays – I'm always looking at her. How do I tell her that she's beautiful? That somewhere in the last five years, I fell in love with her? Assuming, of course, I even know what love is.

He fell asleep in the cupboard with a smile on his face, unbeknownst to him.

That set the tone for the days with the Dursleys. He was given no chance for his hand to heal – the wound was constantly cracking and bleeding. He knew it was going to be hard for him to even use this hand at Hogwarts. *Oh, won't Snape enjoy that! He'll find reasons for me to use my left hand in class, and then deduct points when I can't work properly with it.*

His second day there, he was forced to sit down and write a message for the Order members. Nothing fancy was permitted, just a simple, "Everything is going well here. More in two or three days. Harry." He then heard Vernon talking to Hedwig.

"Owl, I want to see you back as soon as possible. If you don't come back as soon as you can, I promise you that I will kill the boy. I've wanted to for years, and you'll give me an excuse. Drop the message and return. What will those freaks do then, if I take out *their* precious little freak?" He released Hedwig, who flew into the sky.

It was the same for two weeks. Variations on the previous message, all sent by Hedwig, and no one from the Order dropping by to check on him.

It hit him exactly what he was thinking about the Order one day when he was in the water closet scrubbing the floor grout with a toothbrush. His own, of course. His mind went to the Order of the Phoenix. *I'm supposed to be such a wonderful commodity to these people. Well, fuck them! They can't even be bothered to try a physical check-in with me – they'd rather trust these stupid notes.* He heard a low chuckle and looked up in time to be knocked out by Dudley swinging his mother's cast iron frying pan at his head.

He didn't wake up until the next afternoon, when he was punished with a vicious belt beating from Vernon for not finishing his work, and sleeping on the job.

It was in the beginning of July that he finally took his chance. The Dursleys had decided to go somewhere for Dudley's birthday, which hadn't actually arrived yet, but the concert he wanted to see was not going to be in town his birthday weekend. So, they took him to see the band he wanted to see, and locked Harry in the cupboard for the duration.

Harry waited for a full hour before he decided on his course of action. He pressed against the wall of the cupboard and kicked as hard as he could against the door. The door hinges cracked and bulged away from the wall, so he kicked again. The door exploded open and dangled from its padlock.

He climbed out, dragging his trunk and depositing it in the foyer. He stalked over to Vernon's den, and kicked the door open, again near the hinges. This time it fell in quite satisfactorily. He saw a very startled Hedwig in the room, who began hooting happily when she realized what had happened. "Okay girl, I'm going to free you. Fly to Hermione and stay with her." Hedwig hopped out of her cage and held out a leg. "Oh, right." He quickly scribbled a note.

Hermione,

On the run from Dursleys. Wondrous idea Order had backfired. Do not tell Order anything other than that I am no longer at Dursleys.

In fact, I'm not telling you where I'm going so that Dumbledore and Snape can't mind-rape you into giving them the information, since they'd insist I come back here and live in the cupboard again.

Fuck them all! Let Tommy kill all the damned wizards! If this is the kind of treatment the good guys give their saviour, I'd be tempted to join up with Tom.

I won't, though, because it would disappoint YOU, and I've done that too many times. I will fight Voldemort for YOU, Hermione, because you've always been there for me. Not for Dumbledore, or MacGonagall, or even the Weasleys. For you and your parents, and all the other Muggle families out there who get caught in the middle of this shit.

I hope to see you back at Hogwarts, if I survive that long.

Harry

P.S. – Please take care of Hedwig for me.

He tied the letter to Hedwig and said, “Stay with her, girl. That way you’ll be safe.” She nipped his finger affectionately and flew off.

He grabbed Vernon’s heavy luggage carrier (the wheeled one) and put his trunk on it. He grabbed some food as well, and then took a good long look at the house. *It may be childish, but I'm going to make a point to them as I leave.* He very carefully walked around the house and destroyed a good many of their prized possessions. He utterly trashed the bedroom that Vernon and Petunia used, and he took great joy in smashing everything of value in Dudley’s room. Downstairs he simply tipped over the hutch with all Petunia’s fine china, which included some of Vernon’s mother’s irreplaceable china. He destroyed what sat on the mantel, and then walked out the front door, carefully leaving the door slightly ajar. He walked down the street, whistling.

He hadn’t gotten very far when he heard someone come up behind him. “Wotcher, Harry! Where you going?”

“Arabella Figg’s. Care to escort me there?”

“Why you goin’ there? Where to from there?”

“Anywhere not Little Whinging. I am not returning to this town in my lifetime, if I can manage that.” He picked up the pace to a point where Tonks was forced to run to catch up to him.

They were right outside Mrs. Figg's door when Tonks caught up. "Come in, you two!" came the surprised invitation from Mrs. Figg. "Bit early for you to be leaving the Dursley house, isn't it?"

"I thought I'd get out while my owl and I were still alive. Hedwig is going to Hermione. I'm going elsewhere."

"What about the protections?" Tonks asked.

"What about them? Who the *fuck* are they protecting? Certainly not me!" he screamed.

Tonks responded icily, "I don't appreciate being spoken to in that tone, with that language, Harry. Now stop acting like a child, and explain."

He looked back at her, and saw her take a step back in surprise at the look on his face. In his own icy tone, he said, "You find me an Order member I can trust, and I'll talk to them. They'll need to be able to give me a reason to trust them, of course."

He looked at her quickly, a question suddenly striking him. "Who gets the notes that I sent out to the Order to give them my updates?"

"It varies. Could be Dung, could be me, could be Snape. Depends on who's closest."

"And none of you talk to each other."

"Yeah we do. We were getting regular notes from you, so we didn't worry."

"I can't believe that Aurors could be so *fucking STUPID!*" he bellowed. "Anyone ever think to actually, oh, maybe look in physically on your charge?" He peeled his shirt up. The bruises from Vernon's belt were still quite evident, especially where the buckle had scored his flesh. "Tell me while I should trust the Order with even my laundry list." He held out his left hand.

He grabbed a handful of Floo powder in his right hand and tossed it in the fireplace. "Gryffindor Common Room!" As the flames shot up, he stepped through.

Harry quickly stepped to the side and grabbed the nearest heavy object. As the flames flared again, he brought it down hard, striking Tonks hard enough to knock her out. He quickly checked to make sure he hadn't killed her, and ran his things up to his usual dormitory. He grabbed his cloak and his map and ran for the portrait. He told the Fat Lady to get Madame Pomfrey to the Common Room as fast as she could.

He, on the other hand, ran for the statue of the humpbacked witch and headed into Hogsmeade. In the tunnel, just before Honeyduke's, he put the cloak on and then exited. Quickly making it to the Shrieking Shack, he was amused to discover that his suspicions were right – this had been used by members of the Order. *I don't like it, but it's the only place I can go right now.* He tossed the Floo powder into the fireplace and headed for Diagon Alley.

Once there, he headed straight for Gringott's, where he withdrew roughly three thousand Galleons. Back up front, he exchanged half of it for Muggle money, and headed out the door. A few minutes later he was on the streets of Muggle London and searching for a telephone.

It was when he found one that he realized that he didn't know the telephone number he wanted to call. Mentally crossing his fingers, he called directory assistance. "I need the number for a dentist office. I don't know the city, but the name is Granger." A moment later, he had the number and was dialling it.

"Doctors Granger dentists, may I help you?" came a pretty voice on the line.

"I hope so. I need to speak with one of the doctors. I'm a friend of their daughter. The name is Harry Potter."

"Just a moment." He heard the ubiquitous hold music for about a minute, and then a voice came on the line.

"Harry?" The voice was female, and sounded a lot like Hermione, but was also obviously more mature. "Helen Granger. What's happened?"

"Can't really talk, since I don't know who's looking for me. I just wanted you not to worry, since Hermione will be receiving an ... a letter from me in my usual manner, any time now. It's probably going to scare the hell out of her. I wanted to let you know that I'm all right, so that you can reassure her."

"Good god, what happened, Harry?" the woman breathed into the phone. "Hmm, I think your letter just arrived. Hermione's on the other line, frantic. Hang on" A click or two happened, and then he could hear Hermione's breathing. "Hermione?"

"Mum? We have to figure something out to help Harry! He's in trouble, he's bleeding, and ..."

"... and he's on the phone at the moment," Harry said with a smile. "I'm fine, Hermione. I just wanted to get Hedwig to you while she was still alive, and I knew that if she showed up with no note, you'd worry even more than from the note that I sent."

"Where are you?" she asked frantically. "Why is there a bloody hand print on that note?"

"Can't say. The Order may be hunting me as we speak. I swear to you, Hermione – I am not going back to the Dursleys ever again."

"Any hints you can give us, son?" Helen Granger asked.

"Well, I'm two blocks west and two blocks south of the street I do my shopping on, but you'd turn the city upside down trying to find me, probably." He carefully stressed the words *upside down*, hoping that one of them was clever enough to figure it out. *What am I saying? This is Hermione we're talking about.*

"Got it," Helen said. "We're leaving the office almost immediately. Caught us just before we left for the holiday with Hermione. Tell you what. We'll drive over and pick you up and figure out where to go from there, okay? It should take us half an hour, but if we have to turn the city upside down," she said, carefully stressing the same words, "it should be double that." She carefully stressed the word *double*. "You understand me?"

Harry breathed a quiet sigh of relief. "Yes, yes I do. Thanks. I'll stay in plain view out here, since the only ones I have to worry about working in broad daylight are the Riddle gang." He heard a sharp intake of breath from Hermione. "Don't worry, Hermione. I'll be okay."

"We'll see you in a while, Harry," Helen Granger said. "Hang tight."

Harry hung up the phone and looked for somewhere to stand. He almost fainted with happiness when a minivan pulled up in front of him almost exactly fifteen minutes later. "Harry?" said a woman leaning out the window.

Harry was startled. He'd seen Hermione's parents before, but had never looked at them. He was staring at Hermione's older sister, for all he knew. "Mrs. Granger? Right on time."

"Come on over, Harry. Let's get you out of here." He was in the vehicle in record time. As they started to drive off, he looked behind the vehicle. "No one I could see while I was there waiting. With luck, they assumed that I was speaking the truth, so they're looking at a place about eight blocks away for me. I'm just glad that you understood what I was saying. May have been a stupid code, but it worked."

"It wasn't stupid – it was thinking on your feet. Literally." She turned around and saw that Harry was blinking tiredly. "You lay down on the seat in the back, and we'll wake you when we get to the house."

He was asleep in moments.

He awoke as the vehicle slowed down and made a sharp turn into a dark area, and he heard a motor grinding. He also heard Hermione come running out to the minivan, and with a grin that would have warned the Weasley twins what he was thinking, he slid the invisibility cloak over himself.

"Mum! Did you find him? Is he okay?" she was asking, the worry evident in her voice.

Wow, she sounds scared! I didn't mean to worry her that much. I'd better not prank her, then. He sat up and pulled the cloak off, and grinned at her. She squealed, opened the door and yanked him out of the vehicle, trying to pull him into a hug. Unfortunately for him, he wasn't prepared for this, so he ended up tripping and forcing her to the floor, where he ended up laying on top of her.

He blinked in surprise at the sudden removal from the vehicle, and then at the surprise of where he was. He became suddenly embarrassed, since for the first time, all her pleasantly soft spots that he was currently pressing against reminded him that his school chum was a woman, not merely a girl, and he started to react to that. He rolled off her quickly, blushing furiously, and got to his feet. He held out his hand to help her to her feet.

She pulled him into a tight hug, reminding him again how pleasantly curvy she was. *She's my best friend. Don't ruin that by finally admitting that you'd really like to ... no!* He returned the hug, fighting the urge to kiss her and enjoying the smell of her hair. "Hmm, lavender," he murmured.

She stiffened and ended the hug. As the hug broke, she looked vaguely hurt. "Let's get inside."

He blinked at her for a moment. "Okay, but please explain to me when we're in there what stupid thing I did *this* time. I'm always hurting your feelings, and you don't do that to your friends."

They got inside. "Why'd you call me Lavender?" she asked as she led him to the couch.

He looked at her for a moment, trying to think what she was talking about. "Oh!" he said suddenly. "I was talking about the smell of your hair! I wasn't calling you Lavender; I was mentioning the smell that your shampoo left behind. There's lavender oils in it."

She blushed. "I'm sorry, Harry. You have a horrible summer, and the only thing I can do when I first see you is misunderstand you."

"I think I can understand your reaction, though. Here I am holding a pretty girl, and the only thing you hear me say is something that

sounds like another girl's name. Understandable misunderstanding. I'm just glad that's all it was. I've done too much before to hurt you before, and I'm going to make an effort to stop that. You don't hurt your best friend if you can avoid it." He shuddered as the image of her falling at the Department of Mysteries flashed through his mind.

"Harry, I'm okay. I'm down to one potion a day for the next two days, and then I'm done. I'm alive, and I'm here."

"No thanks to Captain Oblivious," he grumbled at himself.

"Harry, you were doing what you thought was the right thing."

"Yes, ignoring the advice of my far more intelligent best friend, which led to me leading five other friends and a number of other people into a trap that killed someone who had gotten out of prison to save my life. Hell of a way to repay him, huh?" He leaned forward on the couch and started to cry.

Hermione was terribly glad that Harry was okay. Her heart had soared when Hedwig had finally shown up for the first time in three weeks, but when she read that note, she was terrified for him. *I've got to find some way to help him! Mum and Dad! They've got to be able to come up with some ideas!*

As she rang her parents' office, she thought about everything. *I have to figure out how to tell him this summer, if I can. Nothing worked right last year. Mum and Dad have given me their support, but now I just have to figure out how to tell him that I love him.*

The telephone call had made her feel much better, knowing he was okay, but now she was worried about getting him to the house.

Oh God, we're going to have the boy I want as my boyfriend at my house, possibly all summer. I have got to tell him, if only so he doesn't get too surprised if I jump him this summer. She giggled to herself. What am I going to do with him around me all summer, with no one but my parents around. Stop that! she admonished herself as

she felt her heart speed up slightly, and she knew that her knickers were damp. *There's more to life than that!*

Yeah, but it's Harry! a voice inside her said. You've wanted to jump him since the end of fourth year!

Shush, you, she said firmly. We'll have to get him used to our attitudes about skin and sex in this household first, remember. Poor boy might explode if I don't warn him. She giggled briefly. I'll bet he wouldn't complain about the view, though. How many girls has he seen nude? I'm betting I'll be his first.

She tried to read as she waited for her parents, and heard the garage door open finally. She ran down the hallway, loving the way her heart soared realizing that she'd see Harry in just a second or two, even loving the butterflies in her stomach. *Wait, he's not in the van! "Mum! Did you find him? Is he okay?"*

A moment or two later, she could see him appearing from underneath his cloak. She squealed and opened the door. *Did I just squeal like a little girl? She pulled on him to get him out of the vehicle, but he overbalanced, and suddenly was pressing her to the floor of the garage. The silence was awkward for a moment, while she warred with herself whether or not to throw her arms around him and snog him senseless. She finally decided not to. Oh my! Did he just start to notice me as a girl? That certainly felt like a ... stiffening of his resolve, she giggled to herself.*

He rolled off and helped her to her feet, so she pulled him into a tight hug. She could feel him quivering ever so slightly, and she could hear him breathing in the scent of her hair. *He likes the way my hair smells!*

"Hmm, Lavender," he murmured into her hair, and she stiffened. *Here I am holding him, and he thinks of Lavender Brown?*

What do you expect? You're no great beauty. Let's just go into the house.

"Let's get inside," she said, and headed inside.

"Okay, but please explain to me when we're in there what stupid thing I did *this* time. I'm always hurting your feelings, and you don't do that to your friends," he said to her, which almost made her stop in her tracks. *He doesn't know what he did? That's cold!*

Wait, this is Harry. What experience does he have with girls? He might have just vocalized that my hair made him think of her, and not meant anything by it. Just ask him.

As they reached the couch, she asked, "Why'd you call me Lavender?"

He looked terribly confused as he pondered her question, but suddenly comprehension struck. "Oh! I was talking about the smell of your hair! I wasn't calling you Lavender; I was mentioning the smell that your shampoo left behind. There's lavender oils in it."

She blinked back tears, hoping he wouldn't notice them. She also felt her face grow hot. "I'm sorry, Harry. You have a horrible summer, and the only thing I can do when I first see you is misunderstand you."

He shrugged. "I think I can understand your reaction, though. Here I am holding a pretty girl, and the only thing you hear me say is something that sounds like another girl's name. Understandable misunderstanding. I'm just glad that's all it was. I've done too much before to hurt you before, and I'm going to make an effort to stop that. You don't hurt your best friend if you can avoid it."

Oh, he called me pretty! He thinks I'm attractive!

She knew what he needed, though. She smiled at him and said, "Harry, I'm okay. I'm down to one potion a day for the next two days, and then I'm done. I'm alive, and I'm here." She was tempted to show him that she had no lasting scars, but then remembered that, above the waist, she was the only thing under this sun-dress. She didn't think he could quite handle that yet.

"No thanks to Captain Oblivious," he grumbled. He looked as if he wanted to punch someone. His words said that the person he wanted to punch was himself.

"Harry, you were doing what you thought was the right thing." She put her hand on his knee.

"Yes, ignoring the advice of my far more intelligent best friend, which led to me leading five other friends and a number of other people into a trap that killed someone who had gotten out of prison to save my life. Hell of a way to repay him, huh?" He took in a shuddering breath and leaned forward on the couch. He started to cry, and the heels of his hands came up to press against his eyes, as if that might stop his tears.

It was as his hands rose that Hermione caught sight of the hand that had left the bloody print. "Oh my God! What happened to you? Who did that?"

"Vernon tripped me my first full day back. My hand landed in a still hot frying pan. He held me there and refused to let me do anything for it. I've had bleach in it every day just to do my best to keep it clean."

"Oh my God," she breathed. "How could you stand the pain?"

She noticed that he actually blushed for a moment after she had asked that question, but filed that in the back of her mind as he said, "If I can handle Voldemort, then I can deal with this."

"Who did this?" Hermione's father had come into the house and caught sight of the offending hand.

"My zoo keepers," Harry said quietly. "The Order's attempt to scare Vernon into treating me better had exactly the opposite effect." He paused. "Would it be possible to go to St. Mungo's and get this dealt with, please? As much as thinking about ... thinking about certain things keeps the pain away, it does hurt." This time Hermione caught his eyes flickering to her during his pause.

Helen Granger had a calculating look on her face. "If you don't mind, I think we should take you to one of our hospitals first, and get this fully documented. Then we go to St. Mungo's and heal you up properly. We deal with the authorities to get the animals who did this to you put away."

Hermione saw that her mother had tears in her eyes. "Mum? Can we ..."

"I was going to suggest that myself, dear. First, let's get him bundled up and to the hospital."

"Excuse me, but what's being talked about here?" Harry asked. "I'm a little tired of others making my decisions for me."

"I'm sorry, Harry dear. We're talking about taking you in until you're ready to be on your own. Sort of a foster son, if you will." She looked at her daughter with amusement. "Actually trying to adopt you might cause some problems for our daughter," she finished with a smile.

Ignoring Harry's confused look, Hermione said, "I just wish that it were next year. Then you'll be seventeen, and can tell them what to do with themselves."

Douglas Granger looked up with interest. "You're sixteen, Harry?"

"I will be on the thirty-first. Why?"

Hermione's father grinned. "Because if we start the paperwork now, Harry, you can be considered an emancipated minor on your birthday. With those bruises and cuts and burns, we can make a good case for your freedom from your guardians. How would you like to be master of your own fate?"

Harry blinked at the man for several moments. In the span of two minutes of talking to a boy he'd never really met before, he'd done more for him in just offering such an option than anyone else had ever done for him before. "I don't know, sir. I don't know anything about living on my own."

Helen Granger grinned. "You can stay with us as long as you'd like, while you learn. That admission shows a level of maturity some never reach."

The pain came crashing in on him again, and he winced. Without thinking, he turned his gaze to Hermione, his face calmed, and he began to relax. "Thank you," he said. "I never say that enough, if

ever, Hermione. Thank you for being my friend. Thank you for being you."

Her hand shot to her chest. "You're ... umm, you're welcome, I guess." She could feel her heart pounding in her chest. *Does he have any idea just how that sounded to me?* "Let's get you to the hospital."

Harry learned a few interesting words at the hospital that day; all of them medical terms (he assumed), and the way they were used, he was fairly certain that they were not complimentary. *I'll have to ask Hermione if she knows what a 'hypocephalic Neanderthal' is.*

He was in a private room when two people walked into the room. One of them was a large black man, and the other was Tonks. She was staring daggers at him. "Whether you believe me or not, Tonks, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I'll wait until you're healed to get revenge, Mr. Potter," she said coldly.

He let his eyes blaze. "Make it a good one, Nymphadora, because that's the only chance you'll ever get." He turned to Kingsley Shacklebolt. "So, is the Order here to kidnap me back to the Dursley household and lock me in that cupboard again? Actually, that would be a bit difficult."

"No, it wouldn't," murmured the man dangerously. "Albus and I repaired all the damage from your childish tantrum. The only thing that the Dursleys found was that you had somehow disappeared with your owl. We are here to transport you to the headquarters of the Order."

"Against my will."

"If need be," Tonks grinned nastily. "You're going to be protected whether or not you like it, ickle Harrykins."

"I assume that someone will be there to constantly *Enervate* me after you are repeatedly forced to *Stupefy* me? I am not staying there. Nor am I returning to the Dursleys."

"You'll change your mind about that," Tonks said.

"You're as stupid as you are clumsy, aren't you, Tonks? Remember seeing this hand before it was bandaged? Vernon did that to me my first day back, and never let me treat it. I have no sense of touch in that hand anymore. You could put my hand over a candle right now, and I couldn't feel it because of him. I have a fractured skull because Dudley struck me with a frying pan." Harry stood up and turned around, displaying his entire backside to them both. "See these love taps? Vernon. Belt." He sat back in the bed. "Promise: if I am sent back to Number four Privet Drive against my will at any time in my life, there will be *at least* three *Avada Kedavra* spells cast, because the Dursleys will be no more."

He looked to Kingsley. "Going to *Oblivate* everyone in the hospital? I'm not leaving here except in the company of the only people I trust anymore – the Grangers." He growled. "Now run back to Dumbledore and tell him the latest info, so that he can figure out who he has to put in danger to make me agree to his terms."

Tonks was actually looking at Harry in horror. "I know, Tonks. I shouldn't talk about casting the A-K on anyone, no matter how much better off the world would be without them."

"Harry, I didn't know ..." Tonks was murmuring.

"Tonks, you never bothered to really ask. It was always 'How the Muggles treating you?' in the company of others like Molly Weasley. I love the woman, but she smothers people like crazy. I don't dare tell her to her face, but she's the reason that Ron's as immature as he is. Ginny grew up the hard way, being taken over by mouldy Voldie, otherwise she'd be just as bad, I'll bet. I can't actually recall anyone just sitting down and asking me exactly what it was like living with the Dursleys."

He sighed. "The police are going to be here soon, to take copious notes on the injuries I took. See if you can get a copy of them when they're done here. You might find them eye-opening."

He looked up to see two men standing in the doorway. "Ah. Looks like the interviewers are here. Thanks for showing up, guys. I do think you need to talk to him for me, though. No idea how long this hand will take to heal."

One of the men said from the door, "Talk to who, son?" They showed their badges and stepped further in.

"Headmaster of my school. Let him know that things are going to be a bit hectic this summer, and I'm uncertain as to how things will work out. I'm hoping to be back to school when it starts September first."

"Shouldn't be a problem from the legal standpoint," they said. "Doctor's ideas are something else, though."

Kingsley and Tonks nodded, Tonks gently squeezing his shoulder, before leaving. Harry grabbed her hand and gave it a quick squeeze before she could pull away, and she smiled sincerely at him. Once they were out of the room, he looked at the police again. "Could I have my friend in here while you interview me? This is the kind of thing that I want her to know, and it'll actually make it easier, I think, than trying to describe this all to someone I don't know."

"Unorthodox, but it shouldn't be a problem." One of them went to the door, then turned around. "Which sister is it?"

"Thank you dear!" came Helen's voice from out in the hall. "I'm her mother."

"Actually, let all three of them in. I think they need to hear this as well, since they've offered to keep an eye on me for the summer."

The interview happened fairly quickly. Harry had a good idea of what he could and could not say to the police. His Hogwarts education was quickly chalked up to a legacy scholarship from his father and mother, who had died in an automobile accident in 1981. The

wounds, however, were carefully and painfully catalogued in words, and Hermione kept crying silently through the interview.

Harry could tell, as they talked, that the police were chalking up the hatred the Dursleys had for him to a dislike for his father. As the interview concluded, the police looked at the Granger family and asked to speak to the parents in the hall, leaving Hermione and Harry in the room alone.

Sniffling, she asked, "How did you get to be so wonderful, with an upbringing like that?"

He laughed quietly. "Have you been hitting some of the medications here? Me, wonderful? That's your worry speaking, Hermione. Tell me that tomorrow after the worry has died down and maybe I'll believe you." She looked ready to cry again, and his face fell.

"How can you be friends with someone who hurts your feelings like I seem to be doing?" he asked, looking at his left hand and intentionally flexing it, against the doctor's orders.

"Harry, this summer has been hell for you. I am not going to worry if you say something that bothers me. And I'm sorry that I'm hurting you."

"I'll worry about it. You don't insult someone you lo ... like a lot on a regular basis. I want to know when I'm doing it. Maybe someday I can be a normal person, with your help."

"I don't think I'd be fond of a normal Harry. I've gotten addicted to the adventure of being your friend," she laughed.

"Addicted to being put in mortal danger on a regular basis, just because you're my friend. You were almost killed because of me, Hermione. Twice. I'm dangerous to know."

"Tough," she said, leaning over and hugging him. "You can't get rid of me that easily, Harry Potter. I'm with you until the end."

He felt himself stiffen slightly. *There's no way she could mean that the way I wish she did. At least I've got her as a friend.*

She separated from him and back up slightly, still leaning over him, smiling. His eyes slid, unbidden, from her face down to the view afforded him now. He could see quite a lot of the curve of her breasts. *I can even see her nip ...* He turned a brilliant shade of red and wrenched his eyes up and began to count the holes in the ceiling tiles. *Jesus, I'm going to blush every time I see her from now on. She's gonna slap me any second now, when she realizes what I saw.*

He was surprised to hear her chuckle and say mischievously, "See something you like, Harry?" He looked back at her in shock, and was surprised to see that she hadn't changed her position.

He carefully locked his eyes on hers and said, "I am sorry, Hermione. I hadn't intended"

"I haven't moved, have I? If it weren't for your blush, I wouldn't have known that you'd seen them. If it makes you feel better, then look at them. I know it's not how I act at school, but ..."

He interrupted by gently pushing her shoulders up so that the view was no longer evident. "Hermione, I'm a fifteen year old boy. If I have a chance at a view like that one, I'm not going to be able to carry on a coherent conversation with you." He took a deep breath. "I treasure our conversations and our friendship. I'm not going to jeopardize that. You are my best friend, and I will not take advantage of you that way. If I ever take you for granted, I want you to tell me. You mean too much to me for me to abuse you like that." He smiled a tired smile. "Before you worry whether or not I liked what I was seeing, remember that I pushed you away so that I could be coherent." He blushed furiously. "What I could see looked very pretty."

Her eyes sparkled with unshed tears. "Thank you, Harry. Would you like to go to sleep now?"

"I am tired. What time is it?"

She looked at her wristwatch. "Almost nine PM. I expect they'll call to end ..."

She was interrupted by the intercom saying, "Visiting hours are now over."

"We'll be back tomorrow, Harry." She leaned back over slowly, keeping her chin up for a moment before she bent her neck and kissed his cheek. "Hope you enjoyed the view. Have a good night."

He smiled. "I will now," he said before she left the room. He slept soundly dreaming of the bright smile she flashed him as she left the room.

Chapter 3

He awoke feeling good, and couldn't understand it at first. *Wait, I'm stretched out, not cramped.* He opened his eyes to see the ceiling of his hospital room, and yesterday came crashing back in on him. *Jeez, I just left the Dursley house and told off Shacklebolt and Tonks. Her revenge will be interesting.*

His mind then ran to the view he'd gotten just before Hermione left. *I sort of wish she hadn't done that. Now I'm going to be looking at her and be like every other guy out there, trying to get under her clothes.* He closed his eyes and scowled. *That's one part of normal I simply don't want. Hermione deserves better than to be drooled over by some little jerk like me.*

What if she loves you? the voice in his head asked, in the voice annoyingly (at the moment) like Hermione's.

Yeah right. She's the sexiest witch at Hogwarts ...

... and that view proved that ... the voice added with a smirk.

... sexiest witch at Hogwarts, and I've seen Ron and a few others looking at her. Besides, it's obvious the way the two of them argue with each other. It's just a matter of time before we hear a ripping noise ending one of their arguments, and we find the two of them shagging in the common room. A quick image of her face in front of his, those beautiful breasts beneath him, him being the one doing the shagging ... No! I will not go there, dammit! She's my best friend! I will not ruin that!

You love her.

And your point is?

Take a risk. Hearing it in Hermione's voice was interesting, to say the least, and made him seriously contemplate it for just a moment.

He shook his head and snorted to himself. *Yeah. I can keep her as my friend, or drive her away by telling her that I harbour feelings for*

her. Unfortunately, those feelings now include shagging her. Smart thinking, stupid. His scowl stayed in place until a face popped into the room.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Hermione asked, worry colouring her face. She'd pulled her hair back to put it into a ponytail, and she was wearing khaki shorts and a blue spaghetti strap top, and it was mildly evident that she was wearing the same thing under this top that she'd worn under her dress yesterday.

He winced internally. *Oh great, more distraction. I can just see telling her, 'Hi, would you mind coming over here and letting me peel you out of that top so that I can gaze longingly at your perfect breasts?'* He laughed as he realized the ridiculousness of the statement.

"Given where your eyes seem to be resting Harry, would you prefer it if I take off my shirt?" she asked him with an amused smile on her face.

He felt his face grow hot, and he looked down. "Hermione, I owe you an apology. I was looking at you as if you were Lavender or Parvati when they're trolling for boys, and not as the beautiful witch you are in your own right. Please forgive me."

"Harry, thank you for calling me beautiful. If my appearance gives you pleasure, then I have no complaints if you stare at me." She laughed. "I just hope you don't expect *them* to answer you if you talk to them."

He snorted. "If they do, then I'll know that they gave me some really good pain killers!" He began to laugh, and she joined him

When the laugh was over, she asked him again. "Why were you scowling before, Harry?"

"Just thinking over a lot of things. The Dursleys, Tonks and Shacklebolt, and your folks. Don't they understand how dangerous it will be for them to take me into your home? Have you explained how dangerous it is to know me?"

"Yes, she has, Harry," Douglas Granger said. "But this is a war. If you know it's happening, you pick a side. Helen and I chose the side of Light, supporting our daughter's ... friend."

What's with all the pausing when they talk about our relationship? We're friends. I'm not going to lose that.

The doctor came in at that point. He looked Harry over for a bit, making notations in the chart, and looked at the hand. Undoing the dressings, the doctor grumbled. "I'd like to do this to the face of that bastard that did this to you. You made it bleed again. We'll probably have to immobilize it to keep you from flexing it and making the skin crack and bleed further." He sighed. "I don't know if anyone told you, but you may never have feeling in that hand again, Mr. Potter."

"So be it," Harry said. "There's worse things in the world than having no feeling in my hand. Being blind would top that list for me." His eyes flickered to Hermione for a moment.

"I understand," replied the doctor with a smile. "Your girlfriend *is* pretty," he added quietly.

"I wish she was my girlfriend," Harry responded just as quietly. "She's just a very good friend right now."

"Good place to start," the doctor said.

"Yeah, but she's interested in our other friend, so I'm not going to push on that subject. I'll just enjoy the way she looks, and envy my best friend."

The doctor shook his head. "Teenage angst. I'd forgotten what it was like. I understand, though. I was in your shoes. She's my wife of ten years now. So I've been there, and I'll wish you the best."

"Thank you. Just curious. How soon will I be discharged from here? I don't want to leave if I'm in danger, but this room and stay is being paid for by her parents, and the least I can do is make my stay here as inexpensive as can safely be managed."

Doug and Helen Granger heard that last comment, and spoke up. “Don’t you worry about that, Harry. You’re important to us, too, so if it means a week in here, you’re in a week. If you’re still here in October, then so be it.”

“Actually, from looking at the X-rays, and the photographs of the wounds, I’m surprised he survived to make it here, in a way. That skull fracture was ugly, I must say. Will you be taking care of him over the summer?”

Before Harry could speak, they said, “Yes, we will.”

“Then I see no reason why he can’t be released into your care as soon as our social worker speaks to the group of you. I don’t see you arguing with getting him to the nearest hospital or clinic if he begins to experience dizziness or fainting, or if the hand starts to bleed unexpectedly.”

“I hope you’re not planning on releasing him before I can speak to him,” a quiet new voice said into the room. Harry looked to see a woman who struck him as a cross between Cho Chang and Fleur Delacour. Hermione’s face was already looking disapproving. The women glided across the floor in a motion guaranteed to make most men pay very close attention to her.

“Mr. Potter? I’m Carla Xiang, and I’m one of the hospital’s social workers. I understand that you’re in the process of trying to legally emancipate yourself from the people who did this to you?”

“Yes. These wonderful people have offered me space with them until I can get on my feet.” Harry was watching Hermione, though. *Why is she so annoyed? It’s just the social worker.*

“How long have you known Mr. Potter?”

Douglas Granger answered. “Personally, about a day. Our daughter, however, has known him for five years now. They go to the same school, and live in the same dormitory house. Hermione trusts him with her life, and we trust our daughter implicitly. She’s a very mature young lady.”

Ms. Xiang looked as if she wanted to say something and was having trouble phrasing it when Helen Granger spoke up. "I think I know what you're worried about, and I will say that I trust my daughter implicitly in *that* respect as well."

"Um," Harry interjected slowly. "What are you talking about?"

"You're a fifteen year old boy, and she's a fifteen year old girl," Ms. Xiang answered.

He snorted. "Yeah, and she's smarter than to get involved with me. If she ever opens her eyes, she'll see the guy right in front of her at the school who's been pining for her for a while. *If the two of them can ever stop arguing*, that is," he finished with a grin. Her eyes widened, and she went slightly white and ran from the room. "Great. I hurt her again. Are you sure you want me living with you? I'm going to be doing that on a regular basis, most likely." He hung his head. "She's my best friend, and all I've seemed to do this past year is hurt her feelings."

"I think I know why she ran from the room, Harry, and the only way that it's your fault is that you made her aware of something she hadn't thought of before. She's not angry at you."

"Go talk to her, Mrs. Granger. If it helps, tell her I'll apologize when she comes back in." Both of her parents left the room.

"Since the situation came up in conversation, how do you feel about that relationship?"

"Well, I don't know enough about relationships to know if their arguing is simply them not admitting that they love each other or the sign of something that should be avoided, but when they aren't arguing, they're good friends." He frowned. "Ron usually starts them. I get along with his family, too, but they have seven children. I'm not about to ask to stay with them until the end of the month, even if they'd offer."

"What do you think about living with the Grangers?"

"They seem like wonderful people. I can see how they raised a girl like Hermione. It wouldn't be a problem, living with Hermione down the hall, if that's what you're worried about. That's the way it is at our school. I haven't tried anything with her there, I'm not likely to here."

"You will be alone with her while the parents are at work."

He scowled angrily at Ms. Xiang for a moment, and then calmed himself. "First, I lo ... respect her too much to attempt to take something not offered to me, and there is no way in hell she'll ever offer herself to me. She's too smart to make that mistake. Second, if I did try to take what she's *not* offering, I'd not only have to face her parents afterward, but Hermione herself would end up making me *wish* that she was going to kill me. I've heard teachers say that she's the most brilliant student they've had in ages. Hell, Ron would kill me after she was done, if anything was left."

Ms. Xiang looked at him sadly. "Hurts being in love with someone who doesn't feel the same way, doesn't it?" she asked quietly. He simply nodded.

Equally as quietly, he said, "I figure that I live with them long enough to get a feel for handling money and the like, and then I find my own apartment to live in. While I would never touch Hermione in any way that she didn't want me to, it won't stop me from wanting to, so I'll move to avoid the temptation."

He snorted. "I have no idea if I'm helping my case or not, but I will say this – given the way the Dursleys have treated me these past fifteen years, if I'm ordered to go back by the courts and taken by force by the police, then I'll tell them that I'll call when I'm done. I swear to you, Ms. Xiang, that if I'm forced to live with the Dursleys again, I will kill them, knowing that I'll go to prison for it. I will not go through another year of this," he said, holding up his left hand, and pointing at his head.

"You won't. To be honest, I've had to learn how to read people, and you're telling me the truth, and so are they. You'll be happy with them." She smiled. "You might want to talk to their daughter, as well. She might surprise you. She wasn't entirely pleased with my

existence. I think she sees me as a rival for the affections of a very handsome young man."

He quirked an eyebrow. "Hitting the hospital's supply of interesting pharmaceuticals?" he asked with a laugh. "And as for the other thing, you look like the result of two girls I had particularly bad experiences with having a child together. No offence to you, but I couldn't get past that if I tried. You're pretty, but"

She laughed. "I understand. I'll bet she doesn't, though. Talk to her. You might find a reason to want to stay with her parents even longer."

"If, by some miracle, you were right, that would be all the more reason to leave as soon as possible. No way would I abuse their hospitality by trying to shag their daughter under their roof." He suddenly realized what he'd said, his voice getting slightly louder, and blushed furiously. "My apologies, Ms. Xiang. That was uncalled for, that kind of language."

"You're much better spoken, and of gentler speech, than some of the others I deal with. I see no problems with you staying with the Grangers, and will tell the doctor that." She turned to see that the doctor was still there. "Well, since you're still here, I think you heard me. As long as they agree to get him to the nearest medical centre if he starts to have problems, then he can leave." She turned to the Grangers and said, "Leave me a telephone number and I'll contact you with the information that you'll need as far as Harry's emancipation is concerned. I think we can have everything ready by July thirty-first, so that one of his best birthday presents is knowing that he need never see the Dursleys again except by accident. We'll need to find out about his family's moneys, to see if there's any surprises out there for him, but as long as he has you to fall back on, he'll be fine." She smiled and left the room after Doug had given her his cellular phone number and received a business card in return.

"Giving your number out to pretty girls again, dear?" Helen laughed.

"I've already given my heart to the prettiest girls around," he said, pulling Helen and Hermione into a hug, "so a phone number is no problem."

The doctor left with a smile, after assuring them that he'd be releasing Harry very shortly. After that, Harry asked, "Hermione, I apologize if I embarrassed you when I mentioned Ron."

"It's all right, Harry. I just don't know how to tell him that I don't fancy him. There's someone else I've fallen for. And you know how Ron gets sometimes. He'll explode at him, and possibly lose the friendship that they've had since first year."

"Oh." *Oh shit. It's not Ron, and he's from our year. Dean? Seamus? Neville? How in hell do I ask her? Dare I ask her?*

"What's wrong, Harry?" she asked. "You blanked out there for a moment. Is it your head?"

He snorted. "I'm not going there, because you'll hurt me. I was just thinking, that's all." Much quieter, he said, "I will admit that I'm looking forward to getting over to St. Mungo's and dealing with this stuff properly." He realized what he had just said and laughed again. "Now I know I'm completely into the wizarding world. I look at drinking a potion and spending a couple hours hurting as bones knit as normal, rather than the six weeks it took me when I broke my arm when I was seven." He shuddered for a moment when he remembered why his arm had been broken.

"How did it happen, Harry?" Douglas asked.

"Dudley. Fireplace poker. Of course, it was my fault that I'd done something that made him swing a fireplace poker at my head. Actually, I think it was my fault that I'd blocked the strike, in Vernon's opinion." He thought for a moment, and suddenly his eyes flared. "I'm just glad I wasn't Harriet, rather than Harry."

"Why'd your eyes flash?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing important. Didn't happen, so I shouldn't get angry over it."

Helen spoke quietly. "I think that's why I want you out of there the most, Harry. You talk about episodes of blatant abuse as if they're the most normal things in the world."

"In my world, they are normal," he said simply. Hermione looked at him with wide eyes, and suddenly burst into the hall. He could hear her starting to cry. "Okay, that's it. That's the last time I mention the Dursleys around her. I am not making her cry again." He could feel his own tears threatening. *Nice going, jerk. You know she's sensitive. Do you enjoy making her cry?*

A nurse came in a few minutes later with a wheelchair, Hermione right behind her, sniffling. Harry headed into the bathroom to dress as best he could, and stepped back out when he was decent. He was immediately plopped into the wheelchair, and a few minutes later was in the Granger minvan, wheeling his way to St. Mungo's.

At St. Mungo's, Harry tried very hard to convince them that Vernon and Dudley were creatures, but instead of the Creature Induced Injury ward, he was sent to Artefact Accidents. Half an hour later he was on his way back to the Granger residence with a series of potions that he would have to take until early October, one per week, to heal the nerve damage.

"Be careful, however," he had been told. "That hand will remain very sensitive until December, most likely. Any serious injury to it, such as further heat damage, may well render it impossible to fully repair ever again."

He had nodded seriously and paid at the bursar's. As they left, he said, "Please tell me what the hospital bill comes out to, so that I can repay you."

"No need, Harry," Doug responded. "You're our charge now, so we'll deal with the hospital bill."

"That was a private room, and those were some very expensive tests! I can't expect you to pay for them on my behalf!"

"Why not?" Helen asked.

"I'm not family. Why should you eat such a big bill for me? I'm not wo
..."

"If you say 'I'm not worth it,'" Helen said, "I'm going to wash your mouth out with soap." She grinned suddenly. "Worse, I'll wash your mouth out with Hermione's attempts at homemade soup."

"I'm never going to live that down, am I?" Hermione said with a blush. "So I misread the cookbook on the amount of salt needed. I learned better, didn't I?"

Doug snorted. "How about that garlic dish you made once?"

"Okay, I overdid it on the garlic. I thought you liked garlic!"

"I could taste it when I breathed the next day!" her father laughed. He looked to Harry. "Beware my daughter in the kitchen, Harry."

"S'okay," he laughed. "I can cook." He opened his mouth to say something more, but realized that he had sworn just a short time ago not to mention the Dursleys around Hermione again. He looked to his left hand. "I'd forgotten how it felt for it not to be in pain all the time. Well, actually, it wasn't. I'd learn how to push the pain behind me." He looked at Hermione. "I need to thank you for that, really. I was thinking about Hogwarts, and my friends, and that helped me concentrate."

"Why thank me, though?"

"For being there for me over the last five years. I'll admit that you were the one I thought of most when I meditated on going past the pain."

She blushed prettily. "I think I like this Harry Potter. First, he worries about my feelings, then he compares me rather favourably with the two prettiest girls in Gryffindor, and then he tells me that thinking about me gets him past intense pain." Her eyes twinkling, she asked, "Is there something else you haven't told me, Mr. Potter?"

He blinked furiously at her for a moment, and blushed. *Oh no, she's starting to figure it out!*

Then tell her, idiot!

Don't call me that! Besides, I'm not going to make her cry again. She's got a thing for Neville, probably – he's the smartest Gryffindor boy in our year.

He was saved from answering by Helen saying, “Look at what you did to him, Hermione. Stunned the poor boy into insensibility.”

Hermione laughed and put her hand on his arm. “I’m sorry, Harry. I do appreciate what you’re telling me, though. I’ve never thought of myself as attractive.”

“Well, you are, so start thinking about yourself that way.” He nodded in such a way as to stamp ‘Finished’ to that part of the conversation. She smiled and wrapped her arms around his right arm, and rested her head on his right shoulder. He put his head back on the back of the seat with a smile on his face. *I'll enjoy what I can, while I can.*

Chapter 4

Harry was resting on a towel on the beach. The Grangers, after clearing it with Ms. Xiang, had decided that since they had planned to stay in the country anyway this year, that Harry was going to be coming on vacation with them. They had taken him shopping, and Hermione simply would not let him buy the swim trunks he had wanted. She had insisted that he buy racing trunks, so he had relented and done so, even though he wasn't sure he'd be able to keep from advertising, given how tight they were. *I may never be in a position to take advantage of the fact, but I have learned that I seem to be above the national average, size-wise, based on the boy's locker rooms.*

"Do I get to see your swimsuit?" he'd asked with a grin.

"On the beach," she responded cheekily.

Well, he was on the beach, having managed to stake out a perfect spot fairly near the water. He had put up the umbrella, and was resting on a towel, waiting for the Grangers to come down and join him. He turned around when he heard the sand crunching behind him. He turned to see them walking toward him, Hermione and her mother both in short robes tied at the waist, showing off quite a lot of shapely leg. He felt his breathing hitch, and the blood in his body was contemplating vacationing in the south.

"In case you didn't recognize your own umbrella," he laughed in a voice he hoped sounded normal, "I'm over here."

They were close enough now that Hermione looked at him and said, "Mother, I'm swooning. I see a Greek god waiting by our beach gear." She dramatically put her hand to her head and began to fall toward the sand.

Harry didn't even think about it – he simply reached out and swooped her into his arms to keep her from hitting the sand. When she came to a rest, she was looking up into his eyes, and he was swept away for just a moment. *It's such a cliché, but her eyes aren't just brown –*

they're the colour of a deep, rich milk chocolate. And they're beautiful

...

She threw her arms around his neck and sighed, "My hero!" melodramatically. When he had righted her, she leaned in and kissed his cheek. While she was there, she whispered, "I love your Quidditch reflexes, Harry. I knew I'd never touch the ground," and kissed his cheek again.

He was looking mildly stunned, and actually put his hand to his cheek where she'd kissed him. She looked at him for a moment before saying, "Harry James Potter, take that robe off right this instant! You're on the beach; be dressed for the beach!" She reached forward and untied his robe, then quickly shucked it off his shoulders, leaving him in the red and gold racing trunks that they had found. He sat down quickly to her laughter.

On the ground, he suddenly realized where eye level was, and quickly looked up at her. "Well, Hermione, you saw me in these trunks when I bought them. I still haven't seen your swimsuit. Your turn," he replied, trying to regain some of his dignity.

She opened her robe and exposed the bikini beneath it. Harry stopped breathing for a moment. The bikini was a brilliant blue colour, and exposed quite a bit of skin. Hermione may officially have been fifteen, but given the time she'd spent in her third year using the time turner, she was already physiologically sixteen. And curvy. Very curvy, at least to Harry's eyes. The triangles covering her breasts were smaller than the palm of his hand, not that he was about to place his palms over the fabric to test that thought. His teeth did quite well where they were, thank you very much. The lower fabric seemed to be comprised of even less material.

Her eyes twinkling, she said, "Coming in swimming, Harry?" and turned to walk down to the shoreline.

The bottom half of the bikini was a thong. Oh. My. God. "Can't swim," he said in as normal a voice as possible. "Don't think learning in an ocean is a good idea. You go on ahead."

Hermione's look was not one of pity, but of sadness. "Are you sure, Harry?"

He smiled genuinely, looking not at her, but at her left eyebrow so that he could have an easier time keeping his eyes from straying lower. "You want to go swimming. Enjoy! The place we're staying has a pool. Maybe tomorrow you can start teaching me how to swim there. But for right now, you go enjoy yourself. We'll all be right here."

"Are you sure it's okay?" she asked. She seemed almost ready to cry for some reason.

Harry mentally bit the bullet and stood. He couldn't stand to see her cry, especially when he was the cause. He pulled her gingerly into a hug, fighting very hard to ignore just how much skin there was to touch, and not being entirely successful. "Hermione, you enjoy swimming. You'd be too worried about me to enjoy it. You go into the water and I'll sit up here with your folks. We're not that far away, so it's not like you'll have to go that far." He grinned. "You can still keep your eyes on my godlike physique from there." He let go and intentionally struck a Gilderoy Lockheart pose, complete with toothy grin.

What he wasn't aware of was the fact that he was a rather fit and trim young man; even if he was a little malnourished this summer, he still cut a fine figure. Conversation nearby stopped for a moment, and a wolf whistle pierced the air from close by. "Mum!" Hermione said in a shocked voice.

"He's got such a cute bum, darling!" her mother laughed, laughing even harder as Harry sat down very suddenly. She added, "He'll be fine, dear. Your father and I can talk with him if he's willing to talk with a couple old farts like us."

"Looks like it'll be you, Mum. Dad's gone off for a munch run. How does a man eat that much and stay so trim?" She frowned for a moment. "Maybe I should ask Ron as well."

"Exercise, dear," her mother replied with an amused undercurrent. "A great deal of rather fun exercise."

Hermione looked to Harry speculatively. "Hmm, I may be developing a stomach from too much sitting and reading. Maybe I'll start an exercise program," she laughed. "Well, down to the water."

Harry was utterly lost. He knew that something had passed between the two women, but he would not have been able to figure it out if you paid him money to do so. He watched in rapt attention as Hermione walked to the waterline and dove into the water, and scowled to himself as he noticed the other men (and a few women) watching with enjoyment. He scowled and turned away.

"What's bothering you, Harry?" Helen Granger asked. "You don't usually see a scowl like that on the beach on a beautiful day like today."

"Nothing, really," Harry said, turning slightly away from the water.

"What do you think of Hermione?" she asked.

He turned to face his best friend's mother. "She's the best friend I've got, although I'll never admit to Ron that I like her a bit more than I like him."

"No, I want to know what you think of her. Good and bad."

Harry looked at her and laughed. "I am really not used to this, you know. The Weasley family has shown me love, but seeing you shows me that the Dursleys are an abomin ... sorry, aberration."

"From what I saw, Harry, you were right the first time," Helen growled. "You're shut of those monsters for good." A short pause before the woman growled again. "You do *not* stuff a child into a cupboard under the stairs as his bedroom unless there's no other room in the house. And their house is big enough to have allowed you a room of your own."

He shrugged. "To be honest, I don't know how successful the emancipation is going to be. They've said for years that I'm 'enrolled' at St. Brutus's Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys. They'll probably say that putting me in a room with bars on it, or in a cupboard that they could lock from the outside; that it was the best

thing to keep them from waking up dead, if you know what I mean. After this year, I wouldn't put it past Dumbledore to supply them with whatever proof was necessary to keep me there."

"Well, I will not stand by and watch you be maligned by freaks who enjoy heaping abuse upon a helpless child to the point that when he somehow makes it to being a fine upstanding young man, he still feels like that child. And if Headmaster Dumbledore attempts such a manoeuvre as what you just described, then he'll be dealing with an angry mother – me."

Harry stared at her for a moment. He was used to Molly and her smothering attitude – she was a wonderful woman, but a bit much at times. Here was a woman who'd only known him the short time they'd been on this vacation, and she was threatening to talk to Dumbledore on his behalf. He couldn't stop himself; he began to cry.

He felt Helen move forward to hug him, and he cried against the woman. It wasn't until he had regained his senses a bit that he was reminded, not for the first time, that Hermione could be mistaken for her mother's younger sister, especially when the swimsuits they wore were so similar. He sat back up quickly. "Thank you for the compliment, dear," she smiled at him.

"Umm," was about all he could say.

"I'm sorry if I embarrassed you, Harry, but you looked like you needed a hug."

"I was just reminded of ... umm ... never mind," he stammered.

"You were reminded that my daughter and I can pretend to be sisters? Should I assume that you find her attractive as well?" The smile on her face was honest with no sense of anger at the possibility that he might fancy her daughter.

"I'll deny it if you tell her I said this, but she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, Mrs. Granger. To answer your other question, I think she's the smartest person I've ever heard of. She can be a bit of a pain when she gets an idea into her head, but I admit that it's a pain only when I don't necessarily agree with her. She does things

for the best of reasons, but will do things without thinking about other people's feelings sometimes, like the ... umm ... servant situation at our school. Only one of them will clean our tower now. She really means well, and I love ... uh, like her for it, but for such a brilliant girl, she doesn't think sometimes!"

He frowned. "Now it sounds like I don't like her. She really is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life, and my mother was beautiful, mind you. She's been there for me when others weren't, and she's the rock I can lean on when I truly need it. She'll annoy me into studying, but it's because of her that I'm doing well at school. I'd be lost without her."

"Something tells me that you're not talking schoolwork, either," Helen said with an understanding look.

"She's ... I can't say it. Partially because of you, but mostly because I just don't have the words."

"Do you love her?"

He sat back, leaning on his arms. "I honestly can't say. Not because I'm afraid to tell you, but because I have no idea. I'd like to think that what I feel is love, but there's multiple reasons I'll never tell her. First is simply that I don't have any history that would teach me what love is. I've got fifteen months of my parents. Not a lot of clear memories from then. Beyond that what do I have? Love is shoving your charge in a closet for ten years? Abusing him physically and mentally? Can't say I've ever had a girlfriend at the school. There was Cho Chang, who I'd been drooling after because she was pretty, but she was dating me as a connection to her dead boyfriend. I didn't realize until I was at the Dursleys that I felt something for Hermione. What else explains me leaving my supposed girlfriend alone on Valentine's Day at Hermione's request, with no explanation?"

"Describe how you feel about her. Maybe I can tell you if you're in love," Helen said.

"Again, I'll deny any of this if you tell her, if only because it's too dangerous for her to get too close to me. That's part of it, to be

honest. I'd mourn if Ron, or Ginny, or Neville, were killed – it would hurt like hell, but I could move on, even if it was very slowly. I almost died when Hermione" His voice hitched as he bit back a sob. "If she died, I really don't know if I could find a reason to go on past ... my situation. Actually, I wouldn't want to." He sighed. "No matter what happens, I want to stay in contact with her when she finds her future husband. I want to stay her friend throughout my life. Her friendship is the most important thing in my life."

"Answer me honestly – if you could see her in the nude, would you take the opportunity? And it really does connect to the previous question, whether you realize it or not."

He looked as if he wanted to swallow his own face for a moment. "May I refuse to answer that on the grounds that her parents might kill me if I answered it?" he finally said with a weak laugh.

"If I can promise you that her mother won't say anything and promises not to kill you, will you answer?" Helen laughed back. "Even though the way you answered it already does answer it."

"I've already said that I think she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life. Would I like to get her alone and naked someday? I'm a sixteen year old boy ... well, almost ... talking about a beautiful woman; what do you think?"

"How about just seeing her walking around on the beach, for example?"

Harry bit his lower lip in thought. "Part of me wants to say yes, just to see her that way. But honestly, right now, I'd say no. It would distract me from her real beauty." He tapped his chest to emphasize what he meant.

Harry looked at Hermione's mother and was treated to the sight of the woman with her jaw slightly dropped. In a thick voice, she finally said, "Harry, you've got it bad." She sniffed once. "What are your plans for my daughter?"

"To be her friend. To be there when she needs me." He laughed in a voice that sounded like he was holding back from crying. "To try not to hate the man she eventually falls in love with and marries."

"What if it's you?" Helen asked with a smile.

He laughed a bitter laugh. "While we're talking fantasy, why don't we have my parents renew their vows at the same ceremony? Maybe the dance with the groom's mother will be nice."

"Why are you so sure that it couldn't be you?" Helen asked in surprise.

"Because, Mrs. Granger, I couldn't *be* that lucky. Your daughter feeling ... never mind. It can't happen, so I enjoy what I can have. Her friendship is that pearl beyond price. To ask for her love is beyond greedy. I already envy the man who will get *that* priceless gift." He looked down at the towel he was sitting on.

"Why won't you tell her how you feel?" Helen asked sadly.

"She's a very sensitive woman, but I'm sure you know that. She gets passionate about things. And when she cries about something, she pours her heart into it. Imagine discovering that your best friend loves you more than his own life. When you're that sensitive, how are you going to feel, knowing that you can never return the feeling? I'd destroy the friendship if I told her. She means too much to me for me to throw that friendship away on a vain and hopeless quest for something I don't even deserve." He bowed his head and let a few tears fall. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Granger. I don't mean to be depressing. It doesn't help that I'm going to die sometime soon."

"Are you sick?"

"No. There was a prophecy – I'll tell you, if only to let someone understand. I'm going to die someday, at the hands of Voldemort. That whole thing that happened ... why did you people agree to take me? I almost got your daughter killed! Hermione almost died because I was too fu ... damned stupid and full of myself to actually listen to her. Sirius is dead because I wouldn't listen. And it's my fault!" He began to sob. "He's dead because of me. She

almost died because of me. You should be throwing me out on the street with the rest of the garbage for almost killing your daughter!"

He missed the two simultaneous sharp intakes of breath as he sobbed against Helen Granger for a time. "Oh, Harry," she crooned to him and ran her fingers through his hair as he cried against her.

He finally sat up and started to turn around, but Helen gently grabbed his face and held it. "Harry, I have something to say to you, and I want you to know that I will keep repeating it until you understand it. I do not blame you for what happened to Hermione. Did you grab her arm and drag her along against her will? I already know the answer to that – she's told us all about it. She chose to be with you, Harry. Her injury is not your fault."

"And as for your being garbage – I will not hear that sort of talk from my future son-in-law! Do you think she would fall in love with someone who was garbage?"

"No. But she's not in love with me."

"That's where you're wrong, Harry," came a soft voice from behind him. He spun to see Hermione kneeling behind him, her swimsuit clinging even more than it had before, now that it was wet. "Harry James Potter, I love you. That's part of why my parents wanted you to come along with us this summer. They wanted to meet the man I told them I hope to marry someday."

He could see the puzzled look on her face as his face fell. "Oh, Hermione – why me? I know I have my dreams, but you can do so much better than me. I'm only going to die young and leave you a widow, assuming I lived long enough to marry you. You usually make such magnificently intelligent choices. How could you be so monumentally stupid as to fall for someone as worthless as me?"

Hermione's face purpled for a moment, and then she looked at her mother. "Promise you'll visit me in prison, mother. I'm going to slowly, carefully and extremely painfully murder the Dursleys."

"Work with me on it, honey, and I'll bet we can get away with it," Helen said. She turned to Harry. "Son, you're moving in with us."

He blinked. Then it struck him what that meant. "Um, that might not be a good idea. If she's crazy enough to be in love with me, well, I think you got what I said. I really don't think it would be a good idea to make Hermione sleep with a Quidditch bat in bed with her."

Hermione raised her eyebrows in amusement. "And why would I need one?"

"To use my testicles as bludgers if I get too forward. I'm almost sixteen, and you're ... well" He started to blush profusely.

"... the most beautiful woman you've ever seen in your life?" she said with a smile.

"How much did you hear?" Harry asked, suddenly going white.

"Ever since you used crying as an excuse to fondle my mother," she laughed. "I saw you crying, and came at a run to see what was wrong." She blushed. "There was at least once that I wanted to grab you and give you my virginity right here on the beach."

Harry just could not quite parse that statement. She had just said that she wanted to ... *in front of her mother*? His mouth opened and closed several times, but no sound except a strangled "Gkk!" escaped.

"Honey, I think you broke his brain. Why don't you walk back up to the hotel with him, and carry on the conversation with a bit more privacy than having Mum listening to every word?" Helen looked to Harry again. "I am informing your headmaster that we are forbidding you to return to the Dursley home, and we will do whatever is necessary to make you safe. You are moving in with us."

Hermione smiled at her mother, and led Harry back to the hotel.

Chapter 5

Back in the hotel room, Harry closed the door and turned around to a surprise. Hermione was reaching behind her back, and a moment later, had peeled the bikini bra over her head. "You'll need to get used to this, Harry. My family is clothing optional. If you're going to be living with us, you'll see me, Mom, and Dad in the nude occasionally. We've tended to stay dressed for you." She laughed. "Besides, back in the hospital, you wanted to peel me out of my top so that you could gaze longingly at my perfect breasts, I think you said?"

"I verbalized that?" he asked, going white again.

"No, but I read lips, and you mouthed it. I don't think they're perfect – they're too small. But you seem to like them."

Harry nodded blankly as he sat down heavily in the nearest chair. He was feeling mildly dizzy and light-headed. "Hermione," he finally managed to croak, "do you have any idea of the hell I'm going to be going through living near you?"

"Why would it be hell?" she asked, obviously a little hurt.

"You heard me out there. Not only am I in love with you but ..." He motioned at her body, and all he could do was finally motion in an hourglass manner.

"Say it, Harry. Be as blunt as you want. I promise not to slap you for it."

He laughed. "Leaving punching open as an option," he grinned.

She returned the laugh as she said, "I promise not to intentionally hurt you for what you want to say. No kicking, punching, or slapping. Any biting will be intended to be mutually satisfying." She was smiling widely as she said that last.

"You really want me to say what's going through my mind?" he asked, a little green. She nodded brightly. "I want to make love to you,

Hermione. I want to caress your body with my oafish hands. I want to pretend I'm a baby at those sexy nipples of yours, and someday I want to get practice at planting a baby between your absolutely magnificent legs. You may not agree, but to me you are the incarnation of Aphrodite made flesh." He blushed even deeper than he currently was. "I'd like to have you teach me how to pleasure you with my tongue."

He smiled. "Oddly enough, I want to see you dressed like you were the other day, where I can catch secret peeks at your extremely perfect breasts. They are exactly the right size for you, Hermione, and I could spend hours rhapsodising about them. I said it to you before, and I repeat it. You are more beautiful than any other woman at Hogwarts, or anywhere else I've seen."

"Even Cho or Fleur?" she asked, her voice saying that she already knew the answer she was going to get, and that she considered it a lie.

"Yes, Hermione. Yes, they are attractive, but as I told your mother out on the beach, your real beauty is in here," he replied, tapping his chest. "Your heart. You have a beautiful soul. They just have beautiful appearances, and shallow souls. My love goes to the woman with the beautiful soul, who just happens to have a particularly sexy body to go with it."

Her eyes widened as she realized that he was telling her the truth. "You know that you just told me that you love me?" she asked quietly.

"I would never have done it, if you hadn't admitted that you love me. I still don't feel worth it, to be honest. But if you love me, I refuse to hide my feelings from you anymore. I love you, Hermione Pot ... Granger."

She smiled, walked over to him and sat on his lap in the chair, pressing his erection between them. Her breasts pressed against his body, and he moaned in sheer joy at how wonderful it felt to him. The moan changed when he felt her lips mashing against his own, and his arms came around her body, one at her waist, and the other coming

up into her hair and holding her head steady as he deepened the simple kiss.

The kiss finally broke, and she gently rested her chin on his shoulder and whispered, "Harry, all you ask is yours. All that is mine to give is yours. You need but ask. But I insist that you ask."

"What will your parents say about it? As much as I want to make love to you; to feel you ... well, I don't even really know what it is I'm asking ... as much as I want that, I will not abuse their trust, and will not be the vehicle of the destruction of that trust. I don't care if I have to lock myself in the bathroom for an hour to release the pressure ..."

She smiled. "This is the Harry that my parents already love. I'm on a Muggle oral contraceptive, and have been for a while. I also took the time during the year to brew up some contraceptive potions. They store for a period of six months, and have a guaranteed duration of two weeks. Studies also show that they work well with Muggle contraceptives, improving the efficacy of both. Considering I took my most recent potion dose yesterday, we could couple here on the floor and not disengage for a week, and there would be no worries. This obvious ignores natural functions and such, but I think you get the idea."

"You're on contraceptives, but you're a virgin. How long have you been planning to ... oh, sh ... that's a question that deserves a slap. Never mind."

She laughed. "You needed to ask it Harry, and there was no malice involved. I've have been planning to give my virginity to the man of my dreams for a while now. Situations did not allow me to jump him at the school as I had hoped might be the case, but we had every intention of bringing him on this trip." She smiled. "My mother was quite well aware of what she was suggesting when she sent us here, Harry. We're open about sex and nudity, and they know that the only man I intend to take inside me is the man I hope to marry someday." The muscle pinned between them twitched at that pronouncement, and she giggled.

"Are you proposing to me, Hermione?" he asked, his mouth open wide.

"I suppose I am, Mr. Potter. Yes, yes I am. It will be a while, since we still have two years to go before we're free of school, but I wish to stake my claim to you here and now. Will you marry me, Harry Potter?" She giggled. "You already started to propose to me. You almost called me Hermione Potter."

"You've always had my heart, Hermione. I didn't realize it until just before you came to rescue me from the Dursleys, but it's true. I love you with every fibre of my being, and can not imagine life without you. If you truly feel that way, then I will do the smartest thing I have ever done in my life and agree to marry the smartest and sexiest witch I will ever know."

She climbed from his lap. As she stood, she said, "Let's go celebrate, Harry." She started to walk away, and noted that he was utterly enraptured with her derriere. "You need to be with me if we're going to celebrate properly, you know. Or were you merely enjoying the show?"

"You have an absolutely perfect ass, Hermione. Has anyone ever told you that?" She blushed prettily at the compliment.

"Get over here," she growled seductively. He stood with a smile and walked over to her. When he had reached her, she said, "Would my lord please remove my swimsuit panties?"

His breath hitched, and he gently slid his thumbs under the cloth at her hips. He pulled down tentatively, but she placed her hands on his and pushed down forcefully. She heard his breathing stop as they slid over her hips, exposing her clean-shaven pubic region. He knelt before her to keep pulling the panties off, and leaned forward to gently kiss the exposed skin. She shuddered and said, "Harry, if you're going to do anything like that, let's go to my bedroom. My knees won't hold out long if you force me to remain standing for that." She stepped out of the bikini bottoms and led him toward her room.

Harry followed her into her bedroom, where she stopped when she reached the end of her bed. Without a word, she put her thumbs in

the waistband of his trunks and pulled down. She giggled when he struck her in the chin as he finally came free of the cloth. "Sorry, Hermione," he said.

"My fault," she smiled. She knelt to push them all the way to the floor, and then leaned forward and ran her tongue up the length of his erection before gently surrounding the tip with her lips. He groaned at the astonishing sensation, and gently rested his hands on her head. She continued for a few moments, sliding him a surprising distance inside her mouth a few times, before releasing him and standing with a smile. "Did my lord enjoy that?"

He blinked at her for several seconds, realizing that his mind simply would not let him create the necessary sounds to form words. He bent down somewhat to kiss her passionately, if a bit clumsily. He tentatively put his hand on her breast, and she broke the kiss. He started to remove his hand, but she captured it and pressed it more firmly to her breast. "You can be firm, Harry. I'll tell you if you hurt me."

He looked into her eyes and it suddenly struck him that this truly was *not* one of his dreams of her – he really was naked with a naked Hermione. He stood an actual chance of physically showing her how much he loved her. His eyes filled with tears.

"What's wrong, Harry?" she asked in alarm.

"Nothing, Hermione. Everything is perfect." He pulled her close and hugged her tightly, willing her to feel the love he felt for her. When he released her, she had tears in her own eyes. "Will you teach me to give you pleasure, Hermione?"

"Lie down on the bed with me, then." She blushed. "I've never actually done it, but I've read a lot, and some of the girls have told me that it's enjoyable. I was thinking of the two of us finding out together just how enjoyable that tongue can be." She laid down on the bed and tugged gently on Harry's hand.

"May I kiss your breasts, Hermione? I've wanted to for a while." She nodded, so he repositioned himself to make it easier. He caressed them gently at first, marvelling at the stiff nipples; the beauty of the

slightly freckled skin beneath his fingers. His breath caught again. "Oh, Hermione, you are so perfect." He began to gently kiss the flesh that his fingers had been teasing, and she gasped slightly. The gasp became more pronounced as he carefully surrounded the closest nipple with his lips, and teased it with his tongue which applying gentle suction. He felt her hand grip the back of his head, and he got the strong impression that she'd be annoyed if he tried to stop. *Like I'd want to stop?* he laughed to himself.

"Oh darling, please don't stop!" she gasped. He increased the force of his suction slowly, and began to swirl his tongue a bit stronger against the hard tip in his mouth. After another minute or so of this, he forcefully disengaged from that breast and moved his ministrations to her other breast, which she was roughly teasing with her fingers. He used his own fingers to continue to tease the nipple he'd just released. "Oh my God, Harry!" she whimpered into the air. "Please! Don't stop ... until ... oh gods ... gonna come ... gonna oh ... ohgodohgodohgodohGODOHGODOHGOD!" she squealed, her back arching to thrust her nipples deeper into his mouth. Finally, she fell back to the bed.

"Wow," she breathed. "I've never come from playing with my nipples before! Between my being so eager, and your incredible tongue ... oh my God, am I going to enjoy being your wife!"

"You really were serious?" he asked incredulously. "You really *do* want to be my wife?"

"It's one excuse for mind-numbing sex," she laughed. Growing serious, she said, "That's just a bonus, though. I want to wake up next to you, Harry. I want to sit in a drawing room with you, doing nothing but reading while you smile at me and read your paper. I want to argue with you so that we can have fun making up. I simply want to be with you, now and forever. A little sex now and then wouldn't be amiss either," she finished with a grin.

He grinned as well and kissed between her breasts, and began to move his kisses down her body. When he reached her pubic area again, she gasped. "Oh my! I shave because of some of the bikinis I wear, but I've never been kissed there before. I feels ... tingly. In a

very good way," she ended in a moan. He continued to kiss her gently, moving slightly lower with every kiss. Finally, he repositioned himself, and was facing her very wet sex between her widely spread legs. "Yes, Harry – please ..."

He gently kissed the area before him, and she shuddered. His lips were wet with her now, and he stuck his tongue out to lick his lips, brushing the tip of his tongue against her. "Oh ..." she gasped. "Please Harry, don't torture me ..." She smiled and stuck his tongue out even further, slipping it gently inside her. She responded by gently closing her legs around his neck and locking her ankles together. He moved closer and began to thrust his tongue into her, drawing delighted gasps out of her with each thrust. He grinned internally and decided to do something he'd read in one of those magazines that Dudley had left lying around once

His tongue began to explore. *Somewhere around here is supposed to be someplace that will drive her crazy if I ...* She bucked upwards as he found a small nub. *Aha!* He began to tease that nub mercilessly, and was amused by the bouncing she was doing on the bed. He let his eyes travel up her body as best he could from this position, and was amused to see her gripping the posts. She was panting incoherently, but suddenly started making an odd mewling noise deep in her throat. He stopped in alarm, but was rather forcefully informed that he should continue his ministrations. As her hands now held his head rather than the posts, he had no choice, and was no longer worried about the sound she was making. It got louder, and suddenly she was crying out an incoherent noise that sounded full of joy. She bucked against him for a time as he continued to torture her, but finally stopped as he could no longer breathe, and forcefully pulled away from her.

When she was capable of speech again, Hermione looked at the man lying next to her with a grin on his face. He looked so perfectly happy. "Two things. First – who taught you how to do that? Second – why are you grinning so widely?"

"Both questions are answered by the same thing. For the first ever in my life, I've been with a woman, and did something to ... well ..."

"Make her come?" she asked with a laugh. "You mean to tell me that what you just did with your tongue comes naturally to you?!"

"I guess so," he admitted.

The grin that appeared threatened to split her face. "Oh, the fan club is going to be so jealous. He's all mine, and he's got a tongue to turn a woman into his sex slave!"

He blinked. "Sex slave? Fan club?" he finally squeaked.

She laughed a throaty laugh that made him twitch. "Unofficial, of course, because we'd have had to approach you for your blessing. And the way you used that tongue on me, oh my GOD are you going to be incredible once you've trained up that native talent of yours! I'll be your sex slave, Harry," she murmured. "Just ask, and I'll try it, at least once."

"I'll admit right now that I'm too worked up after that to want anything more than what any of us guys seem to want." She looked at him, and he realized that he was going to have to say it. "I want to be inside you, Hermione. I want us to be one. Please."

She smiled and pushed him onto his back. "Let me be on top, Harry," she said, straddling him. As she pinned his erection against his body, she could feel herself pulsing against him. *I wonder if he can feel that?*

"Wow," he breathed. "Am I imagining things, or are you ... umm ... throbbing? Against me, I mean?" He was a brilliant scarlet colour.

"I guess that answers that question," she purred at him. "That's what you did to me, Harry. That's my heartbeat you're feeling. You're going to feel that surrounding you in just a minute." She slid up his body until she could kiss him, which he returned with considerable interest, his arms wrapping around her.

When the kiss broke, she whispered, "You kiss wonderfully, no matter which pair of lips."

He blushed furiously again as he breathed in her ear, "I rather liked how you reacted to my French kissing." He laughed quietly as he felt her blush and moaned slightly as he felt her pulse against him slightly.

"I think it's time to reward you for being such a wonderful man," she said in reply, and shifted her position some more such that his erection now pressed against her opening. She began to slide back down his body, making the both of them shiver from the delicious sensations flowing through them both. "Oh my God, it's even better than when I use a vibrator," she gasped. "You're so ... oh my God, you're stretching me"

"Stop!" he said, worried. "If I'm hurting you, we stop right now."

She panted in his ear, "I didn't say you were *hurting* me, I said you were *stretching* me. Wonderfully, I might add. I might not get you ... oh God ... all the way in before I start coming again." She continued to slide backwards. "You can thrust to help me, you know."

"I'm afraid of hurting you. I may have been a virgin until a sec ... ohmigod you're so tight ... second ago, but I know I'm ... oh ..." he growled.

"... bigger than most men," she finished for him. "I can take it all. I'm a very lucky girl that way." She growled and pushed back harder, and moaned as she felt him finally thrust upwards to help her, making their pelvises touch. "Told you," she panted victoriously. She sat up and squeezed him as hard as she could manage with the muscles throbbing against his. She moaned out a giggle as he pulsed once inside her, and grabbed her hips.

"Oh my god I love you, Hermione," he gasped. It sounded almost like a sob, and she could see the tears in his eyes. "What did I do to deserve you?"

She didn't speak, she simply began to gently bounce atop him, and knew that she simply was not going to make it much longer without exploding again. His fingers dug into her hips and he began to thrust

upwards erratically, and as she plunged over the edge into another orgasm, she felt him begin to pulse inside her, and felt his orgasm explode into her.

Chapter 6

Harry awoke a short time later to find Hermione laying beside him, dozing, her arm lazily across his chest. He looked up and realized that they had left the door open, and found her father in the doorway. He motioned to Harry. Harry blanched, gently disengaged and walked toward the man, who was dressed in shorts and a short sleeved shirt. Once Harry had exited the room, Douglas Granger pulled the door shut. He led him out to the common room area of the suite, pointedly noting the two pieces of Hermione's bikini lying on the floor. Harry picked them up, much as he would have at the Dursley home, and carefully placed them, folded, across the back of the couch. Douglas motioned him to the leather chair.

"From what I saw, Mr. Potter, and what I see, can I assume that my little girl is no longer a virgin?" was the somewhat cold question.

Harry fell apart inside, but kept it from his face. "Yes sir. Your daughter and I have been intimate."

"You say that to her father without much thought on how I might react."

"Well, there's no obvious weaponry available, so your choices are bare hands and various crockery, sir," he replied, his head hung low.

"Very true, Mr. Potter. Can you give me a valid reason to not use what you suggested?" If possible, the voice got colder.

"No sir." If it were possible for Harry's head to drop further, it would have.

There was a very long pause before Mr. Granger said, "Excuse me? What did you say?" He sounded more than a little shocked.

"I said that there is no valid reason I can give you not to physically injure me. I was offered something precious by the girl I love, but she's not even of legal age yet, so I have committed a form of rape. I should have attempted to keep my hormones in check, but I was too weak; instead, I have taken something from your daughter that she

can now never give to someone far more deserving. I will not stop you if you choose to exercise your rights as a father in protecting your daughter." Tears had begun to fall from Harry's eyes.

The silence following Harry's comment was even longer before Douglas Granger said in a voice that Harry assumed was shaking in anger, "Go to your room, Harry. I ... need to think for a while."

Harry walked to his room and shook in remorse for a while, crying at what he had done to Hermione and the relationship between her and her parents. Finally, he shook himself free of the sorrow and looked at his owl Hedwig. "Girl, I'm going to need to you fly to Professor Dumbledore for me, okay? Just let me write the note, and I'll send you off." She hooted once quietly and affectionately nipped his finger. In short order, she was winging her way to Scotland. Harry, in the meantime, wrote another note, dressed and then he shoved several changes of clothes into his book bag. Slipping the invisibility cloak over his head, he carefully stepped from his room, and headed toward the common room of the suite. Seeing that Mr. Granger was no longer there, he quickly exited the suite, and soon the hotel.

Hermione awoke feeling slightly sore in a certain tender area, and smiled broadly because of what had caused that tenderness. She looked beside her, and noted that Harry was no longer on the bed. *He must have headed to his own room.* She stood and walked to the door. *Hmm, I don't remember closing it. He must have.* She headed out the into the suite to see her parents sitting there, looking a little tense. "Everything all right?"

She was surprised to see the venomous look her mother shot her father. "No, everything is about as *not* all right as is possible, due to your father's sense of humour." She held out a piece of tear-stained parchment.

Hermione,

I had a talk with your father. I won't be able to live with you now, that much is obvious. He made me realize that no matter how much we both may have wanted what we did, you are underage, which means

that I have raped you under the statutes of this nation. I have taken from you the most precious thing you had – something that belonged to a far more worthy man than this boy you gave it to. I can not forgive myself for not being stronger.

I have sent Hedwig to Professor Dumbledore to procure a portkey for my return to the Dursley household, or the Burrow, or wherever it is deemed is a good place for me to stay for the summer. I would say that it is fairly safe to assume that I will no longer be welcome in your presence, at least when your father is around, so that prevents me from coming back to you for the summer. It is doubtful that I will see you again before September 1st. I am sorry to ask you to carry my things with you, but I needed to travel light, if only to keep your father from committing justifiable homicide. I have my cloak with my, by the way, so that it will be harder for me to be noticed.

Know this, Hermione – I do love you. I just realized that you are better off without me. Please realize it yourself, and find someone better.

Harry

She looked up at her father, eyes blazing. She stared at him for a long moment before asking through gritted teeth. "How long has he been gone, Father?"

"We talked half an hour ago. When I realized what I had done to him, I ... I intended to explain to him that I'd been playing a joke, playing the concerned father. But he reacted so badly that I just ... couldn't speak. It's not that I didn't want to; I *couldn't*. I needed a short break to pull myself together. He's been gone probably twenty minutes. We've sent the hotel security looking for him, and they were going to get the locals involved." The man put his head forward into his hands.

Hermione spun and pulled a wrap-around dress out of her closet. She slipped her sandals on and walked out the door. "Thanks ever so much, Father," she barked as the door closed.

She stalked down the hall and out of the hotel herself. She walked out onto the beach, where she stood staring at the ocean. "Harry,

where are you? Where are you hiding yourself?" she asked the surf. "My idiot of a father and his sense of humour have sent you off when you don't need to be gone." She fell to her knees on the sand, and started to cry.

A short time later, she heard someone say, "Hey honey, I can wipe those tears away."

"Please go away," she said firmly.

"Aw, come on, let me try," the man replied a little more firmly, and took her arm. When she tried to pull away, she discovered that he had a tight grip on her arm. "I tried to make it your choice. I know what you're selling, and I'm buying. Now, come with me." He started to drag her across the beach.

She was surprised by an incoherent roar coming from her left, and suddenly her attacker went flying. She was dragged a short distance, but he released her. As she looked at her attacker, she saw him double up as if someone had landed on his stomach, and then his head began to shoot back and forth as if someone were punching him. Blood began to fly, and she heard bones break, but still the man kept moving. She ran over and pulled who she knew had to be beating the man to death off him. "Harry, please stop – you'll kill him!"

"He deserves it!" came the sobbing response from thin air. She pulled the cloak from him and hugged him tightly.

"I won't let you, Harry. Please. Come back with me to the hotel. Let me fix up your hand. Let my father apologize for his stupidity."

"He has every right to be angry, Hermione! He was standing in the doorway to your room when I woke up! We were both naked, and it was fairly obvious what we'd been doing. He knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that his baby girl is no longer a virgin. And the door was open, as if I was flaunting despoiling his little girl!"

"Harry, he knew my plans. I had told the both of them that I intended to give you what I did today. He knew, and supported it, because I promised him that I was not going into this just for a quick fuck." He

started at her brief profanity, so out of character for her, but she kept talking. "I was giving my body to the man who already holds my heart." She scowled. "If he'd just waited on his damned joke, we could have let you know that he wasn't serious. Instead, he appears to have pressed all the wrong buttons. You were going to willingly go back to the Dursleys? I'll bet you would have willingly climbed into that damned cupboard, too – just to punish yourself more."

Harry blushed. He'd been thinking exactly that. "Hermione, he just reminded me that I'd set my sights too high. The likes of you are not meant for the likes of me. You made a serious mistake giving your heart to someone like me. I don't deserve such beauty."

"Oh Harry," she sighed, trying hard not to cry. She helped him to his feet and led him back to the hotel, absently telling a security person about the unconscious person on the beach. "We're going to have to talk to the police, unfortunately," she murmured.

They re-entered the hotel suite, and Harry was immediately faced with Douglas Granger. "I'm sorry, sir, I ..." Harry began.

"No, Harry, it's me who should apologize. I was trying to pull the concerned father routine, and pushed all the bloody buttons that the Dursleys installed. I ended up making you feel worthless, and that is unforgivable." He sighed. "I saw you waking up, which gave me time to wipe the smile from my face. You two looked so happy, so ... right. I saw why my daughter loves you so much, Harry. I hope someday you can forgive me for the hell I put you through." He met Harry's eyes. "I am stating this now, of my own free will, Harry. If you and Hermione decide to get married, you already have my blessing. I will be proud to call the man who my daughter loves so much my son-in-law."

Harry's jaw dropped. "But ..."

"Harry, none of what you did was wrong. My daughter loves you, and what you told Helen tells me that you love her. Hell, even your goodbye note to Hermione proves how much you love her. If you'll still have us, we'll let you live with us."

"But I ... your daughter isn't a virgin anymore, and it's because of me." He sat down heavily, confusion strong in his eyes. "I don't understand anymore. How should I feel? In a legal sense, I raped Hermione, which makes me feel like the slime I so deservedly should feel like. Part of me is happy that you accept me, but I know that I really don't deserve that sort of happiness."

"Why not?" Helen asked.

"If I were truly worthy of being loved, wouldn't I have been put into a household where I could be taught what love is, instead of being placed with the Dursleys? I'm a weapon, that's all. I'm the only one who can defeat Voldemort, so I was put where I could be safe, until I can be pointed and told to kill."

"What do you mean, you're the only one who can defeat Voldemort?" Hermione asked.

"That prophecy that Voldemort was after? The one we helped him and his Death Eaters get close to? The one where if I'd had even half a brain in my head I would have listened to you and not ended up killing Sirius and almost killing you?"

"Harry" Hermione started to say.

He bulled onward, heading off her attempt to bring him out of his mood. "*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives ... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies ...'* That's what it was, Hermione. It was said to Dumbledore by Trelawney. That's why she works at Hogwarts. She's being protected by Hogwarts magic, and she's made two valid prophecies now." He looked up at her. "Hermione, find someone who can live long enough to make you truly happy. I'm going to die against Voldemort, be it tomorrow or ten years from now. I am going to take him with me, but I won't survive."

"Do you not want to marry me?" she asked, voice throbbing.

"I'd like to live a long happy life with you, giving your parents lots of grandchildren. That can't happen, though."

They both turned at the sound of two sharp cracks, one immediately following the other. The first was Douglas Granger having punched the wall with considerable force, and the second was Nymphadora Tonks standing in the corner of the suite. "Wotcher, Harry!"

"He's not leaving," Douglas said, cradling his hand. "He is staying with us until it's time for them to go back to school."

"He needs to be somewhere safe, Mr. Granger." She pulled her wand, touched the man's hand, and murmured a few words. He flexed his hand, no longer in pain.

"Physically, perhaps. Mentally, he's safer here with people who love him and can finally teach him, if it's not too late, that he's deserving of accepting love."

Tonks could only blink. "What do you mean?"

Hermione stalked over to Tonks. "My fiancé feels unworthy of surviving the battle with Voldemort. What good do his damned blood protections do him if he feels like walking out and offering himself to Voldemort after making love to me?" She blushed as she looked at Harry. "He made me deliriously happy, I want to add." She walked over to him and kissed him gently.

Looking back up at Tonks she finished with "I'll face expulsion from Hogwarts if that's what it takes to keep the man I love safe. And I will tell the headmaster that to his face if necessary." She was shaking as she contemplated facing down Albus Dumbledore.

"If that's what it takes, then I move my daughter and her future husband to Beauxbatons," Douglas Granger said. "I hurt this boy terribly earlier today, and I will die before I do that to him again. He's been the best thing that ever happened to Hermione. You tell your headmaster that Harry will be staying with us. And that's final."

Tonks turned to Harry. "How do you feel about this, Harry?"

"I don't know. This is the first family I've ever been with that didn't automatically knuckle under because they thought Dumbledore knew best. They want to go to bat for me. And for whatever strange reason, they actually want me to marry their daughter, who apparently has had a fit of insanity in deciding that I'm her dream man. They may not be blood, but I'll die for that – for *them*."

He thought for a moment. "Think about that - with all the people I know who are my friends, who is it that is truly going to drive me to destroy the greatest threat to the wizarding world? Two Muggles and their witch daughter. Someday to be the only living parents I have."

He looked to his future in-laws. "Everyone who knows anything about this sees me as this great weapon against Voldemort. You look at me, knowing that knowing me has put your daughter in danger time and again, and still you accept me. You could rightfully demand that I never see your daughter again; instead, you grant me permission to marry this goddess given human form." He smiled. "More than anything else, that will help me get past what the Dursleys have done – knowing that people *want* me to be in their family." He had tears of gratitude in his eyes. "I still don't feel worthy, but I'll work on it."

Tonks smiled at him , and he could see that her own eyes were moist. "For what it's worth, Harry, I'm with you on this. If staying with the people who protect you by blood makes you want to die, then there's no good reason for you to stay with them. I'll go back and talk to the big man for you. By the way, you two – congrats on the engagement! And forget me getting revenge – I understand now, I think." She snorted. "Expect a visit from Dumbledore in a while, if I know him. Ta-ta!" she grinned as she apparated away.

Helen turned to Harry and hugged him again. "We're going to do everything we can to keep you around for all those grandchildren. Grandchildren of *your* own, Harry. We want you to live a long happy life with Hermione."

"I do too, but ..."

"... but we could step outdoors tomorrow and get hit by a bus," Douglas said. "Life happens, and so does death."

"Yeah, but you don't have a bus prophesied to hit you, and have it stalking you."

"Ah, yes," Douglas said with a laugh. "The thing is, with that prophecy you quoted, you may well be Voldemort's bus, to take this example to its truly ludicrous extreme. It doesn't prophecy your death. It prophecies the death of at least one of you." He chuckled. "I'm probably remembering the quote wrong, but I always enjoyed the one attributed to the American general George Patton. 'The important thing is not that you die for your country; it's that you make the other sorry bastard die for his.' We'll do what we can to help you survive this and make Voldemort die."

"I wish the Dursleys cared for me the way you care for Hermione," Harry breathed quietly.

"Oh, we're not doing this for her – we're doing it for you, Harry. She just gets to be the beneficiary of what we're doing. We've only known you a very short time, Harry, but we understand why our Hermione loves you. We love you, too, son."

He was enveloped by the Grangers as he fell to his knees crying.

It was growing dark outside when they heard a knock at the door. Doug Granger opened it to be faced by Albus Dumbledore and Alastor Moody. "May I help you?"

"I am Albus Dumbledore, Mr. Granger. My companion is Alastor Moody. I need to speak with Harry, if I may. This is quite possibly a literal case of life or death."

"Come in. This involves the Dursley family, doesn't it." It was not a question.

"Yes, it does. Sometime earlier today, the protections about the Dursley home began to fail. They completely failed fairly rapidly. This puts Harry in extreme danger."

"When did they fail?" Harry asked with a laugh. He had a suspicion as to what had caused the failure.

"They began to fail between four and five PM," Alastor said. "They simply disappeared at roughly five PM."

Harry's laughter got stronger, with more than a hint of despair and madness to it. "Of course they did! The universe couldn't be that nice to me." He got himself under control and turned to Hermione. "My dear, apparently our professing our love for each other, and then actually daring to act on it shattered the protections at the Dursley household, and therefore the protections over me. The universe thinks I should have died a virgin."

"You have been intimate with Miss Granger?" Albus asked with some interest.

"The future Mrs. Potter, but yes, we have. Do you need a blow-by-blow?" Hermione asked with some asperity.

"Only if it would give you pleasure to give it, Miss Granger," came the amused response. "I am aware what this question sounds like, but I must ask it nonetheless. What was your reasoning for becoming intimate?"

Harry was turning red, and it was somewhat obvious that it was not due to embarrassment. Helen Granger rested her hand on his arm. "Let's give him the benefit of the doubt, Harry. If he's not asking for the right reason, then we all open up on him."

Harry turned and hugged Helen Granger. For just a moment, as he looked at her, she appeared overlayed with long red hair and brilliant emerald green eyes, and his breath caught in his throat before he started crying yet again.

The conversation with Dumbledore was forgotten immediately by Hermione, who ran to Harry's side. "Harry, what's wrong?" she asked.

"I'm sorry," he cried. "I was hugging your mother – well, our mother, I guess, when I saw Mum sort of ... on top of her. I couldn't ... it was just too much."

"You saw Lily? How intriguing," Dumbledore said. "That might explain why Alastor and I could not Apparate directly here."

"You couldn't Apparate here?" Hermione asked with interest. "It sounds as if the wards have transferred, sir."

"I'm not surprised," Douglas Granger said. "With the depth of love these two have for each other, I'm betting no one could get within a few *miles* of them."

"To answer your question, sir," Harry answered hotly. "Hermione and I have, in fact, been sexually active, because we are engaged to be married. I love her and her parents, and if I defeat Voldemort, it will be because of them, not because of anyone else. Hermione, to keep the love of my life alive, and her parents because they're the closest I think I'm going to get to my parents. They love me unconditionally."

Albus opened his mouth to speak, but Harry was on a roll. "Was there a reason, sir, that it was decided that I was worthless, except as a weapon? Or was the fear so great that I might be taken or killed that it was all right to place me in a home where I received exactly the opposite of what my parents would have given me? Vernon and Petunia have detested me from the very first day I was there."

He rounded on Moody before anyone could speak. "And that little stunt you pulled at the station – threatening Vernon? Oh, I wish I had copies of the hospital photographs! Ask these wonderful people what I looked like!" He was mildly surprised to see Doug Granger walk back into the room with an envelope.

"I made sure there were copies, and I brought them with us on vacation, in case someone showed up to try to take Harry away from us. Look at these, and be aware that all the visible damage happened since he returned home *this summer*."

The two elderly mages looked at the photographs, and for the first time Harry could remember, Dumbledore's face went the colour of his beard. "This happened to you since you left school? The burn; the skull fracture; the whipping?"

"Yes, sir. I endured it because I put Hedwig's life above my own safety, and I still would. She is far more intelligent than the average owl, and should not suffer or die because I happen to be good for only one thing. She kept coming back because Vernon threatened her with my murder if she tried to leave a message with anyone."

He spun back to Moody. "That's another thing that frosted me this summer. I'm this extremely important commodity – the only thing that can defeat Voldemort, according to the prophecy. Why in hell didn't anyone actually physically check up on me?! If not for their going to a damned concert for the fucking killer whale son of theirs, I might well still be lying in that cupboard, nursing a useless left hand, broken ribs, and my fractured skull! Yeah, I may have been in a crappy mood because of Sirius' death, but what happened to actually physically checking up on your charge? Occasionally the enemy gets you, and can make you send notes. This summer proved that!"

"Another thing," he said, rounding on Dumbledore. "The Order is supposed to be worried about defeating Voldemort. Well, then, it's damned time that Hermione and I became members, since we know what the prophecy was. Especially since the aim of the Order is directly in line with what the prophecy requires of me. *And you knew that for years!* If Voldemort is to be defeated, then I damned well need the help of the Order. If the Order says no; that I have no right to be a member, then I will have no choice but to sever ties with the Order. The Order's purpose is to support me, not the other way around."

"You told her what the prophecy said?" Dumbledore asked simply.

"I told all three of them. I felt that they had a right to know the danger involved with accepting me into their family. As far as I'm aware, we are the only five who know the prophecy, sir, and I expect someone will chew me out for even mentioning it in front of Moody."

"Are you aware of the danger that they are now in?"

Harry turned puce for a moment, but stopped and clenched his fists and breathed deeply a few times – quite a few times. Finally calm enough not to yell, he said, "Sir. The danger is no greater now unless someone lets slip that they know the prophecy. Their danger

comes from being the parents of a girl who is braver than she is intelligent, since she's in Gryffindor, rather than in Ravenclaw. Frightening thought, if you stop to think about it, given how smart she is. Five others are in grave danger now, because of the only weapon the Order has against Voldemort. They chose to follow me on a errand that killed a man; a man who died because I didn't practice constant vigilance. Ron, Ginny, Neville, Luna, and Hermione are in extreme danger because they dared stand up against Voldemort and his minions." He pulled Hermione close. "The only thing that has given my life any real meaning was almost killed due to my stupidity. I was serious earlier, sir. I will lay down my life to keep this woman, this family safe. I will not lay it down foolishly, since I would prefer to sometime in the future to give these wonderful people some grandchildren, and I can't really do that if I'm dead."

"They are in grave danger from having such a marvellous daughter, sir. She follows me, for some reason, but it is her choice, and it is *that* choice that puts her parents in danger. And from what they said earlier, they wouldn't have it any other way."

"Exactly," said Doug Granger. "This is a war, and we're affected. We can work with the Shadows, or with the Light. Either way, we're involved. Harry is the side of Light. We support our son."

Harry started at the reference. "Son, you and Hermione consummated your love earlier. In the eyes of the universe, you're married, and as far as I'm concerned, you're our son-in-law now. We just have that pesky legal thing to get out of the way. After the nineteenth of September, we can grant permission for Hermione to marry. Since you'll be an emancipated minor as of the thirty-first of July, you can give yourself permission to marry." He grinned suddenly. "How about over Christmas break?"

Harry's jaw was almost on the floor, and Doug laughed. "Didn't expect that kind of reaction, obviously. Despite my ill-advised attempt at a joke, for which I will apologize until you get sick of hearing it, I love and trust my daughter. She told us that she would only take one man to bed – her future husband. She told us his name the summer after your Tri-Wizard Tournament. His name is Harry Potter." He

laughed. "Now comes time to embarrass my daughter without pulling out the photo album."

"Oh no, Daddy, you're not going to ..." Hermione blushed furiously.

"Silence, child!" he said imperiously, but with a laugh. "When she came home from school for Christmas, her first year at Hogwarts, she informed us that she had met the boy she was going to marry. It took us until almost New Year's Day to discover that there were other male students at that school than Harry Potter." He grinned. "Apparently it took until fourth year before there were any male students at the school except Harry, Ron Weasley, and their nemesis Draco Malfoy."

Hermione was blushing furiously, but Harry's jaw had dropped. "You've ... wanted me for that long?"

She couldn't look him in the eye. "Since the moment I opened the door, looking for a toad."

He dropped to one knee before her. "Can you forgive me for being too thick to notice?"

"I won't argue with your being thick," she purred at him in a voice that told him she was *not* thinking of his behaviour, "but you're a boy. Of course you wouldn't understand these things!" He couldn't help but laugh.

Finally, he turned back to Dumbledore. "I'm having a hard time not being angry at you, especially after this time with the Dursleys. You need to know that the Muggles are already exploring them for child abuse, because I have no intention of ever returning to them. I think the only reason I'd save Vernon from a Death Eater would be because I wanted to kill him myself." At Moody's and Dumbledore's shocked looks, he barked, "Can you imagine me *not* wanting revenge on that son of a bitch after the ... the *shit* he's put me through in the last fifteen years? I grew up in a bloody cupboard until I was eleven years old! And whoever repaired the house from my little tantrum could probably figure that out, if they bothered to look! I think my little bit of graffiti is still on that wall. I marked the cupboard as my room, sir. Go to that household, and *look in that damned*

cupboard! They've never been able to paint over it – it may have been my first accidental magic. Look at the repairs from where the Weasley boys *ripped* the bars off my wall, so that I could *escape!* I was always the freak that needed to be dealt with, and your response was always, 'It's for the greater good!' If the greater good involves condoning child abuse, then *who the fuck wants to be good?!?*" He turned and stalked from the room, Hermione in hot pursuit.

Albus Dumbledore stood in stunned silence before Helen and Douglas Granger.

"What's it like, playing with lives like they're chess pieces?" Helen asked.

Albus flinched as if he'd been slapped. Helen continued. "I've only known that boy since the day he called us after escaping from the Dursleys, but I already love him as if I bore him in my body for nine months. My daughter has given that boy her soul, and from what I see, she's the only reason that his soul is even remotely in one piece! Is this Voldemort so much of a threat that the destruction of the most noble, caring soul I've ever met is a worthwhile consequence?"

She stalked closer to Albus. "Earlier today, he informed me that he is worthless. Just a few hours ago, when he blamed himself for the incident that injured my daughter a few weeks ago, he informed me that we should, and I quote, 'be throwing him out on the street with the rest of the garbage' for what had happened to Hermione." She roared her next line. "That boy thinks he's garbage because of your actions, Headmaster! What are you going to do to repair this damage?"

Douglas spoke up. "Sir, remember that my daughter got her intelligence from somewhere. My wife may not be a witch, but I'll bet she can make your life a living hell if you don't listen to her."

"I have no doubt of that now," Dumbledore said. "I admit to being at a loss. My disbelief that such a thing could truly exist – such hatred aimed at a child ... I have made so many wrong decisions concerning

this boy ... correction, this man. I have forced him, whether I fought against it or not, into an early adulthood. I truly do not know what to do to rectify this situation anymore." He looked at Douglas and Helen. "Have you any suggestions?"

"Yes," Doug said. "If an adult he must be, then treat him as an adult. Treat him as the saviour he has to be. This doesn't mean to give him parades or parties, but it does mean that you need to explain things to him. If there's a reason you can't explain it to him at the moment, then try to explain the reasoning behind it. I'm betting that even a simple 'If I explain it, your reaction might not be natural,' would be a lot more acceptable than nothing at all, followed eventually by an explanation. The first allows him some feeling, or even the pretence of input. The second says that he's a child and should listen to his elders and betters. This Occlumency thing that Hermione talks about – is there any other teacher in the school who can teach it to him than this Snape person? From what Hermione can see, even though she's willing to give the teacher the benefit of the doubt, she thinks that his methods are less than effective. Are you going to learn well when faced with a teacher who has told you from the day he met you that you are worthless, and that you're a glory seeker? I've heard about that little explosion at the end of Hermione's third year – are you even sure that the man is sane? Personally, I'd like to meet the man face to face. Can this be arranged without him knowing why we're meeting? I'd like to get a better feel for his true personality."

"This Order thing he talked about – is he right? Can their purpose be stated as 'Support Harry in his fight'? If so, I think I can guarantee that he'll follow through if they don't accept him. He won't end the friendships with the people, but he won't trust the information coming from the Order if you tell him he's too young." He sighed.

"My wife is right. Whether or not he's going to legally be our son-in-law, he's our son, borne by another woman. Just as Hermione clicked with him when they met, we did too. I think he did too. Did you know that we were the ones he called to rescue him? We talked about that. He couldn't think of anyone else. The only other people he would have called were in the Order, and would have delivered him over to you. And what would you have done? From the reaction

that the girl named Tonks had in the hospital room before finding out what had been done to him, you lot would have berated him for being so stupid as to jeopardize himself by leaving." He slammed his hand flat against the wall. "I won't have that done to him, do you hear me?" Doug had tears forming in his eyes.

"I agree, Mr. Granger," Albus Dumbledore said softly. "I have done too much *to* him for so long, in a misguided attempt to protect him. In doing so, I have lost his trust, quite possibly permanently. I will miss the days of him thinking of me as a grandfather figure."

Harry walked back into the room, more than a little mussed, with Hermione behind him, her hair also quite mussed. The dress was not tied quite as firmly around her as it had been earlier.

"Sir, it's still salvageable. It's only been a short time since Sirius's death, and I still haven't truly dealt with that – part of me keeps expecting to get an odd owl, or eagle, or knowing him, a flying wombat saying 'What a surprise! I ended up in Pago-Pago!' That won't happen, though. I need to cry for him, and then get on with my life." He took a breath. "Treat me like an adult. If there's a valid reason not to tell me, such as my lack of Occlumency skills, then *tell* me that, and I'll accept that. Even the need for an honest reaction – I know I'm not a great actor. But don't do what you've done the past five years. Treat me like someone who deserves to be told what he needs to know."

"I'll even understand if the Order says no, as long as you make a concerted effort to make them realize that I'm serious about it – I will not work with the Order to defeat Voldemort if they choose to lock me out because of my age. I will work on my own. I'm sure that the Order will find ways to get me the information anyway, but do they really want the extra time built in to get me the info?"

"I understand, Harry," Albus said. "I wish to state to you now that I will not give you the treatment that I did last year. My office is open to you." He looked to Hermione. "That goes for you as well, Miss ... Mrs. Potter." He looked at them carefully for a moment, and then looked at her parents. "Where will you be on his birthday?"

"We'll be back in the London area for a while, before heading out again until near the end of August," Doug answered. "Why?"

"Because on his birthday I wish to do something that will be of dubious legality in the wizarding world, and of none in the Muggle world, but will help cement the protections that these two have already built." He looked to Hermione and Harry again. "Be proud. The power of your feelings has created an anti-Apparation field of roughly two miles in diameter around the two of you." He chuckled. "I had originally been worried that something else had caused the wards, but I see now the true reason."

"Two miles?" Hermione squeaked. "But that means" She closed her eyes for a moment and bit her lower lip as she began to work the problem through in her head. Harry smiled at her as he watched her. Suddenly her eyes shot open and she looked at Harry. Her eyes were so wide that Harry was almost afraid that they would fall from her head. She suddenly blushed and dropped her gaze demurely.

"Precisely, Hermione," Albus chuckled. "Both the level of power that Harry has at his command, and the depth of his feeling for you."

"What is it, honey?" Helen asked.

"I may be the only girl in all of England who can Arithmantically prove that her lover loves her more than anything else on the planet. The power required for such a field is astronomical. His raw power supplies a part of that, but the depth of his feeling supplies the true power to the field. A two mile radius means that, basically, Harry would storm Hell itself for me."

They looked at Harry, who shrugged. "I could have told you that, Hermione," he said simply.

"Maybe, but I never would have seen it as anything but hyperbole. Now I know, beyond any possible doubt." She turned to Dumbledore, her look changing to one of pride, not to mention looking a little stunned.. "What was this dubiously legal thing you want to do on his birthday?"

"A handfasting ceremony. It is basically"

"It's a trial marriage," she interrupted. "And we can set the duration of the handfasting, can't we?"

"Yes. Traditionally it is a year and a day, but if you chose until, oh, let us choose a random date of September nineteenth, that would also be legitimate. I wonder if someone at Hogwarts is empowered to perform a wedding ceremony on such a date?" he asked, his eyes twinkling merrily. He turned to Doug and Helen. "We'll need your written permission for her to wed, but such a wedding would be legal. In December, you could also do a Muggle ceremony."

The look in Helen's eye made everyone laugh, even Moody. She was obviously looking forward to this.

"Not that I'm complaining, sir," Harry said, "But why the handfasting ceremony?"

"Honestly Harry," Hermione huffed, but with a strong undercurrent of amusement to her voice. "It's to solidify the protections. We've created them, but even a dubiously legal ceremony will have enough magical validity to hold them until we can officially marry in September."

"You are definitely a credit to your parents, Mrs. Potter." At this second reference to her in this matter, she started, causing him to smile. "Hermione, the wards prove what your father stated. In the eyes of whatever deities run this universe, you are married. Who am I to argue?"

"Thank you, sir," Harry said seriously. "How are we working this at Hogwarts?"

"Leave that to me, Harry," Albus smiled. "Fear not, I will not separate you once the school year starts. If you could perhaps hold off on children until at least after Christmas, it would also be appreciated."

"We'll only be sixteen!" he squawked. "I don't even want to contemplate bringing a child into the world until I've at least left

Hogwarts.” He looked to Hermione and his eyes sparkled. “Practice, on the other hand....” Hermione blushed prettily on cue.

Albus laughed. “I will be in contact before the thirty-first. You might wish to invite some people, but it would be good to keep the numbers small for the time being. Perhaps only the Weasley family, and a few other friends from school?”

“The Weasleys? I thought you said small,” Hermione laughed.

Chapter 7

Harry floated in the Granger's swimming pool, dressed in the Granger swimsuit of choice. *I can not believe how quickly I got used to being undressed around these people. I remember Hermione trying to tell me the definition difference between nude and naked earlier this summer. I understand it now. I'm nude right now. When Hermione teases me in front of her parents, reminding them that we're a sexually active couple, then I'm naked.*

He laughed. *Or when her mother comes out, determined to remind the world that she can easily be mistaken for Hermione's older sister.* He laughed again.

"What's so amusing, Mr. Potter?" Hermione asked him as she exited the house dressed exactly as he was. She dove into the pool and swam over to him. As he stopped floating and stood on the bottom of the pool, she slid with dolphin-like grace into a warm embrace.

"Just thinking about changes. Could you imagine me nude in your swimming pool back last summer?"

"Harry, I've imagined you nude in all sorts of places. And yes, this swimming pool is one of them. Would you like to know what we were doing?" she purred at him.

"I think I can guess," he chuckled throatily as he stiffened against her. "I mean, if someone had told you last summer that I would be comfortable, most of the time at least, walking around your house wearing nothing but a smile, would you have believed them?"

"No." She chuckled. "You do like that sun-dress of Mom's though, don't you?" She giggled as he twitched slightly.

"She looks so much like you!" he protested.

She started giggling again, but her face lit up like the sun breaking through the clouds on a stormy day. "That's so sweet," she said, nestling against his shoulder. "So, interested in getting in a little more 'practice' before any of the Weasleys get here?"

He looked up at the clock hanging over the door to the patio. “Do you really want to be ... umm ... otherwise engaged when they show up?” He laughed quietly. “Can you imagine Fred and George, and the ribbing we’d take over it?” She nodded. “And then there’s Ron. We’re hoping to break it to him gently. Do you really want it to be by you screaming an orgasm to the group?”

“Spoilsport,” she purred in his ear.

“We probably ought to get out of the pool and dry off, and dress at least a little bit. We’ve got roughly half an hour before anyone arrives,” he said, and climbed from the pool.

The gods were listening and laughing at them, because at that moment, a sea of red hair flowed into the pool house, led by the youngest of Molly’s children. “Oh my!” was Ginny’s breathless response to the sight before her, while Ron simply said “Gkk!” a few times as he realized that neither of his friends was wearing a stitch.

“Umm, I think you’re early?” Harry said with a weak laugh as he grabbed his towel and wrapped it around his waist.

“Aw!” Ginny said with mock sadness. Harry met Hermione’s eyes and with a twinkle in his own, he moved as if to remove his towel again. “Eek!” she squealed, and hid her eyes against Fred’s chest. Harry just started to laugh.

“I’m sorry, Ginny. Too much time spent with the twins. Actually guys, you caught us as we were about to climb out of the pool and get dressed. Care to head back into the house for a moment to give her a chance to climb out?”

“Do we have to?” George asked with a grin. Ron scowled deeply at him, but it was Harry staring daggers at him that drove George away.

When they were alone, Harry said, “Wow! I can do the ‘don’t screw with me look’ even when I don’t mean it! Cool!”

“It doesn’t bother you that they might see me in the nude?” Hermione asked as she climbed from the pool into the large towel that Harry had waiting for her.

"Well, part of me is insanely jealous that anyone other than your parents and me might see that beautiful sight, but that's a part of me that thinks the way the Dursleys taught me." He grumbled at that thought. "Another part of me thinks that I might as well let them, so that when you find someone better ..."

"Harry James Potter, you know better than that! I can not possibly find someone better, because the best is here with me in this swimming pool!"

"Hermione ..."

"I love you, Harry, and I do not want to hear you denigrating yourself in front of me again! Do you really think so little of me to think I would merely *settle* for 'good enough'? I demand the best!"

He laughed. "If I may finish, I was going to say that I know that's merely the Dursleys talking through me in a different way. You wouldn't feel the way you do for me if I wasn't worth it." He grinned at her.

She nodded and blushed at her outburst, nestling into the towel that Harry was holding around her, his arms wrapped around her waist, now that the towel was fastened. He kissed her hair. "The part that's getting stronger every day, the part that wasn't as embarrassed about being nude in front of Ginny as I once would have been, *that* part thinks 'Let 'em look. She sleeps with *me* tonight.' The part of me that was *nude* in front of Ginny, not *naked*. The part that's starting to look forward to surviving the battle with Voldemort, so that we can get on with our long happy life together."

He kissed her neck gently. "I think you've noticed me every night bowing my head in prayer. I've realized that there must be a God of some sort, to have delivered me into the hands of the most loving and accepting family I could have found. I thank that deity every night for your parents, since without them, you and I wouldn't be getting handfasted on my birthday, and married on yours."

She loosened his grip and turned in his arms, and threw her arms around his neck. "When did you become such a poetic soul, my husband?"

"It's always been there. I've just never had any real reason to release it before." He bent and their lips met.

It took Helen Granger tapping him on the shoulder to end the kiss. "I hate to end that, but the guests are goggling through the glass at you." She grimaced. "I just hope we don't have to uninvite Ronald. He's fit to be tied right now. I think he was hoping that you might fancy him, darling."

Harry looked innocently at Helen. "But I do. Didn't anyone tell you?"

The stunned look on the faces of both women made the statement worthwhile, and Harry started to laugh. "I'm sorry, Mum, but that was priceless; that look was ..." Harry doubled over laughing, holding his stomach. When he could speak again, he added, "You *really* have to specify, since you call us both darling." He linked arms with Hermione and they walked to the door.

I like this Harry better than the one I met at the beginning of the summer, Helen thought. He's still got quite a distance further to go, but he's settling into a security with himself that wasn't there earlier. This is a Harry that might actually be able to defeat this Dark Lord of theirs.

A short time later, after a quick shared shower where they actually only showered, they stepped into the large family room together. Arthur was beaming at the two of them. The twins were obviously plotting something, as was their usual state of affairs, while Ginny was still more than a little stunned at what she'd seen out by the pool. Molly was frowning, but it was Ron that they were worried about. *I hope this isn't what I think it is, Hermione thought.*

"We're here for a reason, folks," Harry started to say. He reached out and took Hermione's hand and kissed it. "I think you can tell that we're a couple now. What you don't know is that this caused the protections around the Dursley household to go away. Completely." He smiled nastily. "Can't say as I'll complain too

much about *that*," he added. "Vernon is currently out on a rather large sum for bail, and awaiting his trial for child abuse."

Molly turned white. "He was actually ..."

"Physically, too," Harry added in a flat voice. "Dad ... uh, Doug? I think they ought to take a look at those photos from my hospital stay." In answer, the envelope containing them hit the table. "The Order's attempts to instil the fear of God into Vernon had the opposite effect. He became physically abusive, leading to that burn some of you are getting a look at right now. Happened the day after we got home from Hogwarts. It wasn't actually treated until I escaped in July, which means roughly two and a half weeks of that pain." He squeezed Hermione's hand. "It was only thoughts of Hogwarts and my friends there that helped me get past the pain."

"I escaped and ran to Hogwarts, depositing my things there. Don't ask me how I got to the Gryffindor common room through the Floo system – I just did, even though I shouldn't have been able to. From there I headed to London, and called the Grangers. I didn't dare call your family, unfortunately, because you're members of the Order, and I really was not entirely happy with the Order's handling of me to that point. I love you guys, but I was afraid that you'd just hand me back to Dumbledore who'd drop me somewhere else I couldn't get free of."

He scowled slightly. "I was on the run right then – I wasn't exactly thinking clearly, and I apologize to you all for thinking the way I did; about not trusting you. The pictures explain it, but still... I owe Tonks a serious apology for almost killing her when she followed me to the common room." At the look he received from the Weasley children, he explained, "I brought something heavy down on her head when she came through. Knocked her clean out. Had the paintings run to get Pomfrey while I ran for ... elsewhere. Ended up in Diagon Alley, and got money from Gringott's. The rest, as they say, is history."

Hermione interrupted. "Some people may blame what happened next on Harry, but if it's anyone's fault, it's mine. I've been in love with Harry; I've wanted to be his wife, since before I understood that's what that feeling actually was. Well, we were out at the beach a week ago, and I managed to overhear him admitting to Mum how he

felt about me." She looked at Molly. "I'm going to be blunt now, so deal with it. I dragged him back to our hotel room and convinced him that our desire for each other was mutual, and that I would not keep his teeth in a jar by my bed if he acted on it. Our act of making love shattered the wards around the Dursleys, wards already weakened by their treatment of Harry and the fact that we had admitted our love for each other. We have discovered since then that we are going to annoy the hell out of people in London for a while – the anti-Apparition wards around us are roughly four miles in diameter. I'm hoping those drop eventually, or it's going to get quite annoying trying to get my license," she laughed.

Harry picked the conversation back up. "You're here, really, for an invitation to two separate parties. First off, on the thirty-first, we're doing a handfasting ceremony to temporarily cement the protection that Hermione now gives me."

"You do know what handfasting is, don't you, Harry?" Arthur interrupted.

"Yes, sir, I do. It's the temporary marriage to this girl that will be cemented into a permanent one in the wizarding world on her birthday. Yeah, I know it's faster than anyone would have expected."

"You think I'm not nervous?" Hermione said. "I'm fifteen. I come across as knowing everything, to which there is no end to the parade of students reminding me of that attitude." Her eyes flickered to Ron for just a moment. "The only place I'm truly secure, though, is here at home. Even then, until recently, I wasn't, completely. Here I am, a witch, living with people who I try to help understand my other world, but I'm never quite sure if they've gotten it. I love them dearly, but sometimes I feel lost. Compound that with the fact that, in the Muggle world, I'm something of a freak because my family isn't normal in our attitudes about nudity and sex, neither things to be ashamed of. Then I go to the wizard world, where my attitudes are even less welcome, because they're about two hundred years behind the Muggles. My being more intelligent than the normal student makes me even more of a freak. Is it any wonder I go even deeper into the books? Why I don't form any real lasting friendships or relationships at school? I'm scared! I can't dress the way I'd like to,

the other girls make fun of me because I'm not as pretty as other girls like Cho Chang and because I read all the time, instead of giggling over boys, and the boys are scared of me because I'm a bookworm whose best friend is *Hogwarts: A History*." She shivered slightly, and Harry put his arms around her protectively. "And now I'm getting married. Yes, I told my parents that my virginity was going to that man that I would marry, and I decided a while back who that was, but it still doesn't hide the fact that I'm marrying at sixteen! Everyone's going to think I'm pregnant! I wanted to wait until we had at least graduated." She sniffled. "I love him, but I didn't want one of the reasons I married him to be that it was necessary to keep him alive."

"But it would anyway, Hermione," he whispered quietly in her ear. "Didn't you know that I have a rare condition that can only be treated by regular doses of incredible sex with the most beautiful witch in existence?"

"Harry!" she squeaked, laughing. "Care to repeat that for them?"

"Are you kidding?" he laughed. "Why do you think I whispered it?"

Douglas and Helen Granger looked to the assembled Weasleys. "There you have it. We all felt it best to hear it from Harry and Hermione directly, rather than second- or third-hand." Helen hugged her daughter.

Molly looked on the edge of tears, and Ginny looked more than slightly crest-fallen. Ron looked ready to explode, however. He clenched his fists and carefully walked to the door to the outdoors. He opened it and stepped onto the lawn and walked quite a distance away from the house.

"What do we do?" Harry asked. "I want to go talk to him, but I think that Hermione and I are the last ones who should be speaking to him at this moment. But if I don't, he might take that as an insult."

Doug spoke up. "Let me go over to him. It would probably be a good idea to be visible, so that I can make sure he knows that you wanted to come over, but that I suggested against it."

Ron turned as Doug Granger approached. "Hello, Mr. Granger. I'm sorry for the attitude. I'm really trying to work some things out."

Doug noticed that Ron was clenching and unclenching his fists. "Care to talk about it?" he said in a manner he hoped sounded comforting.

"It hurts, y'know?" Ron said. "I've fancied your daughter for a while now. At least a year. I figured, 'Hey, I may be scared, but someday I'll get the courage, and then we can be boyfriend and girlfriend. Now I find out today that not only was that never going to happen, but she's getting married to my other best friend!" He bent his elbows, bringing his fists up as if preparing for a fight. "I am so damned jealous of him right now! Part of me wants to hate him for getting everything in life – money, fame, and now the girl! But then the part of me that is *trying* to be an adult reminds me that it required his parents dying to get the money, and those pictures remind me of the price of his fame."

"But I can't help but hate him right now, dammit! I would have liked the chance to find out what I really feel for your daughter. I'm jealous of the fact that he gets to see her naked. I'm ..." Ron's eyes shot wide.

Doug laughed as he realized the thought that had to be running through Ron's head at this exact moment. "It's okay, Ron. I was your age once as well. I know what it's like to want to see a pretty girl without her clothes." He laughed. "Besides, she'd kill you if you tried something."

Ron laughed, a hint of bitterness colouring his voice. "How do I face them, though? How do I tell Harry I'm happy for him when a part of me wants to *be* him – the part that has his arm around your daughter, and feels her kisses? How do I tell your daughter that I wish I were Harry? I may make fun of her at the school, but I notice things. I have this image of being this – well, this clown – it runs in the family, after all. Percy is the odd man out. If I get too serious, they start to wonder what's wrong. Everything I know about love tells me that I love your daughter. How do I face them with a smile, knowing that no matter how much I like Harry, and will be at his back against

Vo...Vol...You-Know-Who, part of me hates him so much for having something I want?"

Doug could see the tears that Ron was fighting hard not to cry. "Ron, this may sound weird, but I'm betting that they'll accept it if you tell them what you just told me. It'll hurt a bit, and it might put a strain on your relationship for a while, but which is better – holding it in and exploding someday, saying things that might permanently destroy things, or to put a temporary strain on the friendship by complete honesty, and have an even stronger friendship later on? I've learned one thing about Harry this summer – he values honesty above all else. He admits that he doesn't always practice what he preaches, but he tries." He motioned over toward the house. "Look at them. They're over there, worried about you. They want you to be happy, but they understand that you have feelings for her. What they're worried most about is losing you, Ron. It may not be the way you want her to, but she *does* love you. You are one of the two best friends she's got." He laughed. "Let's put it this way, Ron. When she came back from Hogwarts her first year, it took me forever to discover that there were more male students at that school than Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and their enemy Draco Malfoy. She told me all about the people who meant everything to her – her roommates and you two boys. If you don't give up on them, they won't give up on you."

Ron took a deep breath and finally said, "Sir? Could you send them over? Please? I'd like to tell them this while I have the courage."

Doug nodded, and headed back to the group. "You two go on over." As they walked over to Ron, he turned to the rest. "Please try not to tease him too much about this. The only other boy I've ever seen in that much pain is going to be my son-in-law. He loves my daughter, and is trying to *not* hate his best friends."

Fred and George nodded solemnly. "We can't all be as lucky as Fred and I were," George murmured. "We may be the eternal pranksters, but we have a heart."

Ginny looked pensive. "Maybe we can get him at least looking at another girl – and I think I know the perfect one. She'd listen to him,

and I'll bet if he bothered to pay attention to her, she'd help him." She laughed. "Besides, I'm pretty sure she'd like him to see what's under her robes, if only he'll ask."

Chapter 8

July thirty-first came around, and it was going to be a busy day.

Harry awoke at five-thirty in the morning, as was his usual for his birthday. He didn't know why that was the case. *Actually, yes I do. This was always the day I worked extra hard around the Dursley house. I didn't even begin to think about enjoying my birthday until I got to Hogwarts and made friends.* He moved and felt weight on his left arm. He turned to find Hermione asleep on his left shoulder, her hair everywhere and her face free of cares. *I know I thank you every night, whoever you are out there, but thank you again for bringing such beauty into my life.* He kissed her cheek and carefully disengaged from her, reluctantly. *So today I begin my life forever free of the Dursleys. In a way, it's a pity. I wish Aunt Petunia were salvageable. She had one last connection to her dead sister, and she threw it away.* He snorted derisively.

He walked into the family room and picked up a book. He was more than a little annoyed at the fact that someone had managed to schedule the start of Vernon's trial for that day. *I understand that such a fast trial date is unheard of. I wonder if anyone in the Ministry twisted a few arms? I wonder if they chose today's date on purpose?*

He'd been reading for a few minutes before he began to chuckle quietly. *I just realized what I picked up to take my mind off things,* he thought as he closed Hogwarts, A History. *I guess Hermione is rubbing off on me.*

...

Get your mind out of the gutter!

Why? It's fun! You're blocking my snorkel! he laughed to himself.

"What's so funny, Harry?" Helen Granger asked as she came out from her bedroom, Doug right behind her.

He jumped to his feet and swept the both of them into a hug. "Thank you for the greatest present anyone has ever gotten! If not for you

two, there would be no Hermione. I could be happy never receiving another gift ever again in my lifetime, knowing that she exists."

"You're welcome, but you still haven't explained what was so funny," Doug smiled at him.

"I was just joking with myself – thought something that could be taken two ways," he replied. "The fact that I can do that right now, after these last few months? That's all because of you three."

"It's mostly because of Hermione," Helen said.

"True, but as I said, where would Hermione be without such wonderful parents?" He laughed again. "I don't know if I'll ever stop thanking you for producing the most beautiful woman ever to grace the world."

"Why are you giving us presents on *your* birthday?" said a tired voice behind him. He turned to face Hermione, and ran over to swoop her into a hug.

"Because you deserve them!" he cried happily. "For simply being you!" He kissed her rather thoroughly.

"If you keep that up, Mister Potter, you're going to be late to the courthouse, because I'll consider it my duty to trip you and beat you to the floor, as Robert Heinlein used to say," she purred at him.

"Why must you put difficult decisions before me, my love?" he laughed. He twirled her around once and said, "I'm free of them today! I don't even have to sign any paperwork – I just decide I'm not living with them anymore!" He did a little dance that had the three Grangers laughing hysterically within moments.

"Breakfast first," Helen finally said, "and then we get ready for the courthouse."

Harry bounced into the kitchen. "What does everyone want?"

"Out!" Helen laughed. "It's your birthday, you are not cooking."

He bowed and permitted her to take control of her own kitchen. A short time later, they were on the long drive to the courthouse, all properly dressed for a day in court.

I wish that he wasn't needed here today, Hermione thought. It's his birthday, and he has to see his old guardian go on trial, and be threatened by his aunt and cousin for it. She had already watched his mood change from the happiest she had seen in a long time to the brooding and moody individual she was unfortunately used to.

He'd been waiting outside when Dudley and Petunia had come up to them. Petunia started in on him immediately. "How could you do this, after all that we've done for you over the years? We didn't have to take you in, you know."

"You might wish to be careful, Mrs. Dursley," Harry said loudly enough that the barrister's assistant for the Crown looked up and walked over by them. "After all, remember why your husband is on trial. Do you wish to be added to the prosecution?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, turning white.

"I mean that if you admit, in front of witnesses, that you were aware of the treatment that your husband permitted to happen under your roof, you could be considered an accomplice. In memory of your sister, I make no such accusations."

Petunia Dursley apparently couldn't decide whether to turn white in fear or red in anger, so she alternated for a short time, before stalking off. Dudley, on the other hand, stood before Harry, fists tightly clenched. "How dare you do this to Dad after all we've done for you!" His fists came up.

Before he could swing, though, Harry said, "Witnesses, Dudley. Courthouse. Witnesses." Dudley snorted and stalked off after Petunia.

It was then that Harry relaxed just a bit, and his face turned red. He began clenching and unclenching his own fists. Helen Granger put

her hand on his shoulder and said, “I may not have the right, Harry, but I’m proud of you keeping your temper.”

“It was difficult,” he replied, turning to hug his soon-to-be mother-in-law. “But I discovered that releasing my anger explosively the way I really wanted to wouldn’t solve anything, back a couple months ago, in the headmaster’s office. Plus, it would actually help Vernon’s case.” He took a few deep breaths. “Doesn’t mean that I *didn’t* want to beat the hell out of them both.”

Tears threatened, but he quashed them ruthlessly. “I don’t want to hate them as much as I do. That leads to turning out like V … Tom Riddle. But after the treatment they’ve given me since I was fifteen months old, how do I *not* hate them?”

Doug placed a hand on Harry’s other shoulder, while Hermione flowed into his arms. “Hating isn’t wrong, Harry. It’s often a driving force in righting some wrong. It’s when you let it control your life that it becomes an evil thing. When everything you do is somehow tinged with that hatred; a sense of revenge, if you will, then you’re sliding into Riddle territory.” He squeezed Harry’s shoulder once. “What do you intend to do now that you’re free of them? Remember, you’re emancipated as of today; you need never return to them.”

“Other than to get those belongings of mine that they haven’t destroyed? I don’t intend to deal with them ever again, except when situations arise where I have no choice.”

It was then that Vernon and his barrister walked by. After going momentarily puce, Vernon calmed and smiled at Harry; a vicious smile, and then he walked into the courtroom.

“We get to sit out here, right?” Harry asked the prosecution assistant.

“Yes, Mister Potter. We’ll call you when we’re ready. For what it’s worth from someone who doesn’t know you, I think you handled yourself marvellously around the three of them; quite the adult. Things should go well, especially if you stay that calm when questioned. We don’t expect this trial to last more than a week, to be honest, and it is likely to be shorter than that.” He nodded and entered the courtroom.

They had been sitting in the hallway for roughly an hour when a small crowd appeared. Ron Weasley led the group, comprised of himself, Ginny, the twins, their parents, Minerva MacGonagall and Remus Lupin. Both were dressed severely, but could pass for Muggles. "We're here for your support, chum," Ron said simply.

Harry stood and pulled Ron into a hug. "Thanks, Ron. Given that talk we had, you have no idea how much this means to me."

"Hey, I need to give in to the inevitable," he said, not bothering to explain. "Need to get used to it."

"Tell me about it, Ron. Before this girl told me how she felt, I thought it was going to be you two. We almost had bets on when the arguments would suddenly stop to be replaced with ... well, let's just say that we were expecting to hear robes rip and see clothing flying everywhere."

"Maybe you were, Harry ..." Fred said.

"... but we all knew it was you and Hermione," George finished.

"Much to Ginny's chagrin," Fred added.

"Where'd you get an idea that love worked that way?" Ginny asked, confused.

Ron shrugged. "I never realized I was being that nasty. Maybe it's because I was used to being teased by *certain people* *cough* FredandGeorge *cough* to a point where I thought that's how you treated people you love." He turned to them. "You guys are the reason I hate spiders, you know."

Harry just jerked a thumb toward the courtroom. "I think those ... creatures had a hand in it as well. I still don't know that what I feel for her is love." He turned. "I just know that I'll die for her, and that life without her isn't worth living." He kissed her forehead. "And I try to tell her how I feel daily."

"That's as good a working definition for the emotion as I've heard, Harry," Minerva MacGonagall said. "The only improvement I've heard is that the other person's happiness is vital to your own."

"When did you start reading Robert Heinlein, Professor?" Hermione asked in shock.

"Ever since you accidentally left your copy of 'Time Enough For Love' in my office," she smiled. "Remind me to return it when we return to Hogwarts. I am uncertain that I agree with his views on family and such, but he is an interesting writer."

"Keep it," Hermione said. "I replaced it because I thought I'd lost it somewhere. If you want more of his work, I can get you more."

"I think I would like that," came the thoughtful response. "He is a thought provoking author, even if you disagree with him."

Harry shook his head. He was getting nervous. He really did not want to enter the courtroom at all, because he knew he'd have to face Vernon and his barrister. Plus, the more he thought about it, the more he felt that later today was a mistake. Hermione was tying herself to him for his protection. She loved him, but he knew she could do so much better than him.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"In there. I know Vernon. He wins all the time. He told me so. That grin of his as he went in tells me he's got something planned. I'm going to be destroyed in there, as far as my reputation goes." He laughed bitterly. "Then I can be the crazy boy from St. Brutus's and that psychotic Boy Who Lived."

"People are fickle," he grumbled. "I'm the first one anyone blames as far as things go with ... us, and I think you know how I mean that. Until the situation works out properly, and suddenly those same people are 'Oh, we always knew Harry was innocent!' Ernie MacMillan was one of them. Justin really wasn't any better."

He snorted. “I understand, and I forgave them, but I don’t forget. Fourth year, when so many people abandoned me because they *knew* I’d found a way around the rules.” Ron blushed and ducked his head. “There are still people in the other houses who know that I actually killed Cedric, did you know that? I hear them occasionally.” He turned to Hermione. “How’s it feel to know that some people will be taking bets on when I get you killed, or kill you myself, since I’m obviously crazy? Can you handle being ostracised by classmates that once liked you because they happen to dislike me?”

“I will deal with it, because I know the real you, not the picture of you that gets built up by papers like the Daily Prophet or the Sun.” At the confused looks from the others, she explained, “Muggle paper like what people think the Quibbler is like. Not entirely trustworthy.” She looked back to Harry. “I know the you that thought of me when you discovered that there was a mountain troll in the school. You knew I was crying, and came looking for me.” She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “I never thanked you for risking your life by climbing that troll’s back, Harry.” She looked to Professor MacGonagall. “I assume you’ve known the truth for a while now, of course.”

“Not really, but I’m not worried. I saw the beginnings of a true friendship between you three that night, and that alone needed rewarding.” MacGonagall looked to Harry, who was blushing slightly. Her eyes fell to his hands. “Oh dear!” said Minerva MacGonagall. “Your hand! I’ve seen the photographs, Mister Potter. Your hand simply could not have healed that well in a month. I’m afraid I shall have to … may I?” She asked. When he looked questioningly at her, she said, “I’m afraid that I shall have to go against everything I believe in and inflict a horrifying injury on a student … and a friend,” she murmured. “I need to make your hand look like it has undergone a month’s worth of burn recovery in a Muggle hospital.” When he nodded, she looked to Hermione. “Help me, my dear? I shall need a good idea of when it looks proper, and that I simply can not do, not being from your world.”

She palmed her wand and began to Transfigure Harry’s hand. He inhaled sharply as the burning sensation tore through him, and he

looked at Hermione as they worked. He let himself fall into her looks – the way her hair lay, the gentle tears at the corners of her eyes from the pain she was helping to inflict, the quivering of her lip every time he grimaced anew. The pain flowed around him as he looked at her, and soon they were done. He looked down at his hand, and winced. It wasn't as ugly as it was at the beginning of the month, but it certainly wasn't pretty. The skin was cracked and peeling in quite a few spots, even if it did appear moist. Hermione smiled weakly and quoted, “Merely corroborative detail intended to add artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative.”

“Will you refrain from putting in your oar?” her mother replied with a sad smile. “I truly wish this weren't necessary, son.”

Minerva MacGonagall actually had a tear in her eye, an unusual display of emotion for the assistant headmaster. “It's all right, Professor,” Harry said. “You were right. If I walked in there with a perfectly healed hand, then a case could be made for my having made everything up. Besides, if I have to come back again, we simply cover my hand in bandages and a large glove next time. I think I can wear something like that for a while.” After a moment, he asked, “Will I need to do healing potions to heal this?”

“You could,” Hermione replied before MacGonagall could, “but Transfiguring it back would actually be easier. We couldn't have healed your hand before because it wasn't an intentional Transfiguration that did it. In this case, however, since your hand was carefully Transfigured to look like that ...”

“I get it!” Ginny said. “Since his hand was good a minute ago, and you intended it to look like that, resetting to its healed state will be easy. Making it healed from what it was in the beginning of July would be more difficult because it didn't have an easily accessible memory of what it was like before!”

“Miss Granger, have you considered teaching?” Minerva MacGonagall asked with a smile.

“Yes, but I'm something of a know-it-all, and I get exasperated if someone doesn't get what I think is an easy concept. Something I'll have to work on, no matter where I work.”

The door to the courtroom opened and a bailiff appeared. "Mister Potter? The Court requires your presence, please."

Harry walked the steps downward from the doors to the witness box. It would not normally be a long distance, but Harry, in his own way, truly was on trial here, as opposed to merely feeling as if he were. *Am I going to see one of these per year now? Last year trying to decide whether or not I should have allowed Dudley and I to be murdered by Dementors, and now this. I can only assume Fudge will try to bring me up on charges for daring to handfast Hermione.* He walked holding his left hand against his body carefully, not letting it be seen by anyone.

He finally reached the witness box, and swore that the testimony that he would give would be honest and truthful. He did his best to ignore the snort from Vernon, sitting in the dock. Vernon's barrister walked over to the box. "Hello, Mister Potter. Harry, I believe it is. May I call you Harry?"

"I have no complaints about it," Harry replied calmly.

"Well, Harry. It's no real secret that you and your uncle haven't really gotten along over the years, wouldn't you say?"

Harry snorted. "That's safe to say."

"So, do you have any idea why this dislike exists? What reasons that your Uncle Vernon might have for disliking you?"

Harry frowned. "All I have is some thoughts on the matter. I have no proof of any of it."

"Conjecture, then. Why doesn't he like you?"

"I understand that he didn't get along with my parents. Perhaps he's never quite forgiven my father for something."

"What did your father do?"

"Honestly, sir? I don't know. I never knew the man, and no one has ever told me. I have the fantasies that any child does of thinking that his father was some sports star, or maybe an agent in the fight against evil with a capital E, but I also know that those thoughts are fantasies," he smiled. "I've never had a conversation with anyone who really knew my parents." He was more than a little surprised that the barrister was letting him answer these without stopping him.

"So if you found out that your father was unemployed, what would you do?"

"Not to be cheeky, sir, but ask what he was unemployed from. What kind of industry did he work in?"

"What if you found out he'd never worked? That he'd lived off the dole for years?"

Harry knew he was fishing for something to get Harry angry, and a part of him really wanted to give the man the satisfaction. *My dad died for what he thought was a good cause! Damn Vernon to hell!* Taking a breath, he finally said, "If it was provable, then I'd be sad at the loss of a dream. If it's just a suggestion with no proof behind it, then I'd ignore it until proven otherwise."

"You seem to have gotten somewhat angry at the suggestion that your father may never have worked for a living. Care to explain why?" The barrister's smile reminded him of a shark, even though no teeth were visible.

"He was my father, and I never knew him. As I said earlier, I have fantasies of him doing great things. If he was unemployed and never worked in his life, well, it ..." He laughed suddenly. "It means that my father wasn't secretly MI-6, or MI-5, or whatever it is. It means Dad wasn't the real world version of James Bond." He shrugged. "Illusions are nice, but they don't put food on the table."

"Unlike Vernon Dursley?"

"True, his job with Grunnings brings money into the Dursley home."

"His wife is your aunt. Why don't you refer to it as *your* home? After all, you lived with them for all these years, when you weren't at school."

Harry sighed. "Are you really sure you want me to explain? It won't be complementary to your client."

"Your uncle. Yes, tell us about the treatment you've gotten at his hands." The barrister was rather smarmy at the moment, and Harry was curious just what Vernon had done to feel secure about this treatment.

"Well, until I was eleven years old, my bedroom was the cupboard underneath the stairs. Quite often, I was locked in it. I was moved to Dudley's second bedroom after my first year at my school."

The barrister interrupted. "What school might that be?"

Harry laughed. "It's a small school in Scotland, named Hogwarts. I go there on a legacy scholarship. It was either from Mum or Dad."

"What do they teach at this school?"

Ah, there's his tactic – make me look insane, or even get my wand snapped. He looked puzzled, though. "I'm not sure I follow you, sir. It's a school. They teach the subjects you'd expect – History, Mathematics, the sciences ..."

"What sort of 'sciences'?"

"Well, we've had animal biology, plant biology – we've even had astronomy courses. Maybe they're not exactly standard course-loads, but I seem to do all right in them." He grimaced. "Don't get along well with my chemistry teacher, though. Personality clash or something." He finally looked up into the gallery and saw Minerva MacGonagall smiling and trying very hard to stifle a laugh.

"No unusual classes?" the barrister pushed.

"How do you define unusual? We've had interesting things happen in some of the classes."

"Such as?"

Harry was glad that Hermione had looked up some Muggle chemistry for him. "Well, there was that small explosion one time in chemistry class. We *all* learned that too large a piece of sodium in a container of water can get ... interesting. And bright."

"None of your classes are anything but normal?"

Harry looked over to Vernon and saw that he was trying very hard not to turn puce. "I can't really say, sir. I've never been to a school of this level other than Hogwarts. I can only assume that our course-load is similar to other schools of its type." He shrugged, smiling inwardly. "I'm not sure what you're looking for, to be honest." Harry paused. "Should I continue describing growing up at the Dursley house?"

"No, quite all right," the barrister said, looking a bit grey. "No further questions at this time, but we retain the right to call him at another time."

The judge nodded. "Prosecution?"

"Mr. Potter," the Crown prosecutor started. "I think *I* would like to know more about your life growing up at the Dursley home. I understand that you felt it a bit disturbing."

"Well, getting to age eleven thinking it was normal to be locked in a cupboard under the stairs, receiving things like broken toothpicks on your birthday, and then finding out that your classmates have families that don't look at them as a burden ..."

"Objection!" Vernon's barrister shouted.

"Overruled. You permitted his opinions in your questioning. You can't have it both ways, counsellor. Continue, Mr. Potter."

"Yes, your Honour. Well, I don't know if they were removed, but for the longest time, there were multiple locks on the outside of my bedroom, once they had moved me up into Dudley's second bedroom. That's how they always referred to it. It wasn't my room; it

was mine by sufferance. There's a pet flap installed in that door. That's how I'd be fed sometimes. A tin of stone cold soup or something of that sort would be pushed through the flap for me."

"How about your treatment at their hands?"

"Well, I have to thank them for the fact that when I'm of age, I can probably start my own landscaping business. After all, the garden that they've won awards for was almost entirely done by me most of the summers. Let's see my chores were – mowing, weeding, pruning, painting buildings, making breakfasts that I would sometimes be permitted to eat if they left any, all the garden work, cleaning the car, washing the sidewalk, painting the fences around the back, painting the low brick wall in the front – basically if there was outdoor work I did it. Then, moving indoors, there was mopping the floors, doing the dishes, doing all the laundry, setting the table for all meals, scrubbing the water closets and bath rooms, dusting, cleaning up after Dudley which happens to be a full time job in and of itself – it comes down to the same thing. If there was a chore, I did it."

"Builds character, working. What kind of pocket money were you given for this work you did?"

Harry couldn't help it; he barked a short bitter laugh. "Pocket money? What's that? All that work I mentioned was how I paid for the privilege of being fed at their sufferance and living under their roof, as I was often told by Uncle Vernon at the top of his lungs. I didn't get paid; I paid them with my labours."

The room was silent, and he met Hermione's eyes. Her hand was to her mouth in horror and shock, and he could tell from her face that she was trying very hard not to cry.

"Let's talk about this year. You came back from school, and what happened?"

"I don't know. All I know is that I was made to sleep in the cupboard once again, sharing the space with my school trunk."

"It wasn't all that roomy in there when you were younger and smaller, was it?"

“No.”

“So what happened?”

“First day back, I made breakfast. Eggs, scrambled; and bacon. They like them hot, so I carried the pan over. As I headed back after serving them, I tripped for some reason. My hand landed in the pan, and suddenly Vernon was holding me down and threatening me. I don’t really remember what he said. I was in too much pain. I wasn’t permitted to go to the hospital to treat it.”

“Show the court your hand.” Harry held up his left hand, and heard various gasps around the room. “With the court’s permission, I enter the following photographs and X-rays into evidence, items A through T.” The photos and X-rays were handed to the judge, who shook his head and allowed them into evidence. “Why is your hand unbandaged, Mister Potter?”

“Probably not the smartest thing I could have done, but I figured someone would want to see the damage, and anyone can wear a bunch of bandages and maybe a glove. This way everyone can see the hand and know that it’s real.” He prayed that the answer made some sense with what the prosecutor had asked.

The prosecutor smiled. “Proof that no ‘magic’ was done on the hand, Mister Potter?”

Harry started, and then laughed weakly. “Trust me, sir. If I’d been able to do magic this summer, I would have,” he replied, and held up his hand. He was intrigued to note that Vernon flinched. *Oh, not good, Vernon. Your mistake.*

“Your hand looks cleaner and, well, better than one would expect for only a month’s worth of healing. Why didn’t it go septic?”

“I assume that it was the fact that I daily had to clean the floors and such. I simply ensured that I did the final cleaning of the day late at night, and soaked the hand in a water and bleach mixture. It might not have been easy to deal with, as far as being painful, but I wasn’t permitted access to the medical supplies in the Dursley home.”

"I find it worrisome that you are so able to speak of what must have been intense pain, and that your aunt had nothing to do with helping you."

Let's see if I can get Aunt Petunia really annoyed by protecting her. "Well, what good is screaming and crying over an injury really going to do for me? You get used to it after a while. As for my aunt, I assume – well, Uncle Vernon runs a tight ship at home, if you understand me."

"I'm not sure I do. Elucidate," the prosecutor replied.

"He likes things just so. A place for everything, and everything in its place. My choices are to assume that my aunt was a willing participant, or that she was better at following Uncle Vernon's orders. I assume the latter." He let his eyes drift to his aunt, and the raw hatred there was astonishing.

The prosecutor did not miss this, and smiled. "Mister Potter, were you aware that there was a fund set aside for your upkeep, being paid to the Dursleys on a monthly basis?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean to say that there was a substantial sum paid to your aunt and uncle on the first of every month to pay for a proper upbringing for you."

Harry stared at Vernon, who was now grey and shaking slightly. "You mean to tell me that there was extra money coming in to pay for the added expense of my being there? I was not, in fact, an extra burden on their already tight purses?" Harry's hands clenched as he stared at his uncle, and he didn't even noticed that he had begun to bleed from the left hand. "I wish I could do magic right now, uncle," he grumbled. "I'd turn you into the pig you are."

He looked down at his hands finally, and visibly brought himself under control. He looked up at the judge and said, "I beg the Court's pardon. My outburst was uncalled for."

Vernon's barrister moved that Harry's outburst be struck from the record, which was denied. The judge turned to Harry and said, "Your outburst is understandable, Mister Potter, but will be tolerated only once. Please control yourself and do not allow another such outburst to happen."

"Yes, your honour," Harry said meekly. "Again, your pardon." A nurse was quickly called for, and his hand was bandaged.

Harry sat through another two hours of questioning from the Crown's prosecutor, bringing out the treatment at the Dursley hands. He was there as information came out, again and again, how radically different his upbringing had been from the average child's. Documentation of James Potter's Muggle assets came forward, and Harry had been astonished. He learned quickly that these were above and beyond what was in Gringott's. The amount of money paid per month for his upkeep would have kept him quite comfortable.

Hermione was getting scared. After his outburst to his uncle, Harry had gone cold. He had gone inside himself. She knew how difficult it was to break him free of that when that had happened. *What's worse is that he's going to fake being happy, for me.*

Damn it, we were supposed to be getting handfasted today, and this has to happen. Today, of all days! She wiped viciously at her eyes, trying not to cry, while Helen Granger put her arm around her shoulders.

Eventually, the questioning was over, and he was released for the day, with the admonition that he needed to be available for further questioning at another time. *Well, we'll be with him for the next few days,* Hermione thought. He nodded and walked from the courtroom.

They followed him out the door, where he sat down and clenched his fists. Blood began to seep through the bandages. "I am working very, very hard at not letting my emotions get the worst of me. I hadn't thought it possible to hate Vernon Dursley more than I already did. I

starved and slaved for them, and they took money meant to raise me and spent it on themselves!" He was shaking with rage.

Douglas Granger touched his shoulder and said, "Harry, I know it doesn't help much, but I'm sure that a bug can be put in the Crown's ear on this matter. Force the Dursleys to pay back what was stolen from you."

"I suppose," he murmured.

Molly interjected. "They're done with you for the day, right, Harry?" When he nodded, she said, "Well, we should see to that hand." She grabbed his arm and began to pull him toward the rest rooms. Minerva and Hermione followed in her wake.

They began to chuckle as they realized that Molly was dragging him into the ladies room. Harry froze, causing Molly to stop in her tracks. "That's ... "

"Hermione, dear, will you be a dear and head in to warn any ladies that we're bringing a man into the room, for medical reasons?" Hermione chuckled and did as asked, discovering that the room was empty. Harry was quickly dragged into the room.

Hermione couldn't hold it in anymore; she began laughing. "Harry, you've faced Voldemort multiple times, and you're terrified of being in the ladies rest rooms?" The others flinched at the mention of the Dark Lord.

"Him I understand. 'Kill Harry Potter and take over the world.' Simple. Girls are a mystery." He said it with such honesty and sincerity, and with such a straight face that Hermione hugged him gently as she chuckled.

"Well, you'll have a long life trying to figure us out," Minerva smiled as she began unwrapping his hand. "Once this is unwrapped, we'll clean the bandages and wrap the hand again until you leave the building." In short order, Harry's hand was back to its previous unburned state. Molly *Scourgified* his bandages, and they quickly had them back on his hand, just as someone entered the room. "We

needed somewhere to tend to his hand," Minerva explained at the woman's shocked look. They rushed Harry from the room.

"What took so long?" Ron asked.

Harry turned to the ladies, and his eyes sparkled for just a moment. "Do I have permission to tell him about the Jacuzzi and the masseuse? Or will we need to be *Obliviated* now?"

"Huh! So it's true!" Fred and George said in unison.

"Alicia told us," George said.

"And Angelina backed her up," Fred added. Hermione caught the twinkle in their eyes, and the wide look in Ron's.

"Can we keep you boys sworn to secrecy?" Helen asked. "I'd really hate to have to tell the Sisterhood that we have to change everything now."

Ginny looked at Helen with annoyance. "Great. Now they know about the Sisterhood. Now they *need* to be *Obliviated*. Warn their girlfriends that they need to go onto full snog alert."

Hermione grabbed Harry without warning and proceeded to kiss him rather thoroughly. His arms flapped a bit uselessly at first, but then moved to enfold her, and began to return the kiss with interest. When the kiss finally broke, she was blinking. "What were we talking about?" she asked breathlessly.

"Getting out of here for a wedding," Helen said firmly. "We need to get moving." She took charge of the group, and in short order they were packed into the Granger van and the Ministry car that the Weasley family had managed to secure, and headed back to the Granger household.

Chapter 9

"Why did they have to schedule me being at the damned trial for today, of all days?" Harry grumbled. "Ignoring the fact that it's my birthday – actually, let's not. Somehow, the Dursleys have once again managed to ..." He stopped and took a deep breath. "No. It solves nothing. I'm free of them, and even if the wards were still up, I'd tell Dumbledore that I'm never going back to them."

Minerva McGonagall replied sadly, "Were it not for the testimony I heard today, I would ... I can not believe that people can be so" She was at a loss for words for the first time that Harry could easily remember.

"Grindelwald. Voldemort. Hitler. Stalin. Vernon is *nothing* compared to them." He paused for a moment. "Y'know, I'm surprised that Fudge didn't send a stooge over to watch out for a slip of the tongue, to give him an excuse to snap my wand."

"That's my job," Hermione blurted, and then turned a shade that Harry was starting to think of as 'Weasley red'. "Umm"

Minerva was trying very hard not to laugh, but was unable to keep the smile off her face, no matter how hard she tried. Harry actually cracked a smile for the first time in a few hours. "Umm, yourself," he chuckled. "Thinking of having it bronzed, while we're at it?" He shuddered. "If so, make sure it's been detached before being dipped in molten bronze, please."

Helen snickered in the front seat. "Ignoring comments about bronzing body parts, are you two looking forward to the handfasting tonight?"

Harry watched Hermione's eyes flicker to Professor McGonagall before she said with a twinkle in those eyes, "Actually, I was looking forward to the consummation afterward."

Both students were surprised by McGonagall's delighted laughter. "I remember feeling exactly the same way when my husband and I went to Gretna in front of our friends. We clasped hands over the

blacksmith's anvil and said our vows, then exchanged rings. Our friends didn't see us for another two days." She looked to her favourite student. "Remind me to give you a few suggestions before the handfasting, Hermione." When she saw Harry's jaw drop, she added with a smile, "I am only in my seventies, Harry. I've got many a year left ahead of me."

Harry took a long look at his Transfiguration teacher, and the years seemed to strip away from her for just a moment. "You were a beautiful young woman, Professor, if what I saw was what you were then."

"Not attracted to someone who could be your grandmother?" McGonagall smiled.

"Not when I have the most beautiful witch I've ever known in my arms," he replied with a smile, hugging Hermione.

"Excellent answer," both witches replied in unison, and then laughed. "You'll do well, Harry. Most people your age I would argue against marriage for any reason, but I think most of my misgivings about your wedding can be narrowed to your seeming too young for marriage. While I think you could both stand more maturity, I think you are entering this union with the proper solemnity." She paused before adding, "Besides, my husband and I were some of the last ones to take advantage of the marriage laws in Scotland being what they were until 1940. Now there's all that paperwork that you need to go through."

"I may be a poor student," Harry replied, "but even I know that marriage isn't something you jump into 'just because'." He frowned. "Not to speak ill of a friend, but Ron isn't ready yet. To be honest, I don't think I'm really ready yet. But to keep some semblance of wards around me, we have to do this handfasting."

"I don't think anyone is ever *really* ready, Harry," said Doug Granger.

"Oh, that reminds me," Helen said. "We'll need info from Hogwarts in order to get the paperwork in for the September wedding. Civil or religious wedding; who happens to be accredited as a Registrar at Hogwarts; that sort of thing. We need the paperwork in by

September fourth at the absolute latest, but at least four weeks earlier is better. They'll check things out, make sure these two can legally get married, and then on the nineteenth, they marry."

The vehicle pulled into the garage, while the Ministry car pulled up along the curbside. The others climbed out, but Harry was still seated in the van, thinking. Hermione climbed back in and sat down beside him. "Harry? What's wrong?"

"September. Getting married. You won't deny that you're doing it as a protection for me, right? No matter how much you love me? Part of it is to keep me safe, right?"

"Yes. You mean everything to me, Harry. If we have to get married earlier than I'd originally hoped ... well, to be honest, planned, then we do it."

"So you give up the white gown, and the flowers, and the big hall, and everything, just to stand wherever we do this at Hogwarts, or in Hogsmeade? You give up a dream of yours, just to keep me safe?"

"I wouldn't call it giving up a dream ..." she started to say.

"What would you call it? You wanted your wedding to be perfect – hell, even when I thought that it would be someone else getting that lucky, I was willing to empty my personal Gringott's vault to pay for your wedding, as my gift to you." He deflated. "The Dursleys were right. All I can do is destroy lives. My parents died because I exist. The Dursleys could quite possibly have been quite happy, but I was forced to live with them, and that changed their entire lives – I destroyed whatever plans that they might have had."

He inhaled and spoke quickly before anyone could interrupt him. "My 'love of adventure' at Hogwarts put me in a position to almost kill my best friends multiple times – I haven't forgotten how Ron was willing to sacrifice his life in our first year, just so I could get to the Stone! You were petrified by a basilisk because you were helping me! You almost died last year, because I wouldn't listen to you, and Sirius *did* die because of me! Cedric died because of some stupid, misguided sense of honour that I've got – the Diggorys lost their only son, because I'm even alive!"

"And now I ruin your dream of your perfect wedding. We do a furtive handfasting here at your parents yard, and then the very day it becomes legal for you to marry in Scotland, we get married. While we're still in school. And whether you admit it or not, this changes plans for what to do after we leave Hogwarts."

"And it's all because you got involved with Harry Bloody Potter, the Boy-Too-Stupid-To-Die-When-AK'd." He put his hand to his eyes and rubbed them. "I'm not going to cry, don't worry about that. I've had enough weakness of that sort for the past month. But unless this handfasting doesn't cement the protections, I'm calling off the September wedding, Hermione. I've almost killed you, I've gotten you marked for death by a dark wizard and his followers, and I've insulted you over the years. I'll be damned if I'm going to destroy one of your dreams as well. You'll have the wedding you want, not the wedding that keeps me safe."

He kept his hands over his eyes, heels pressed into them as he sat, and eventually he heard Hermione leave the vehicle and enter the house. He heard footsteps he judged to be male come to the vehicle. "Chum? Let's go into the back yard and talk for a while. I think you need it."

Harry climbed out of the vehicle and followed Ron out the back door of the garage into the lawn. They walked quite a ways away from the house before Ron stopped him and said, "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't knock your head off your shoulders. You're getting handfasted today, and you tell her you're calling off your September wedding? Are you *trying* to hurt her?"

"Maybe she'll come to her bloody senses and realize that I'm the *worst* thing for her, dammit!" Harry shouted. "I've gotten her almost killed, Ron! *Twice!* How do you think that makes me feel? I love her so much it hurts, Ron. It hurts knowing that all she's going to get being married to me is a one-way ticket to an early grave! It's bad enough that *you're* marked for death as my best friend, but her? The second we get married, especially if we do it at school, every Death Nibbler in school is going to go running to their Death Eater parent and talk about the wedding. Fast track right to the top of the 'kidnap and torture' list!"

He began to pace back and forth in front of his red-headed friend. "And for what? For being married to someone who has gotten two people killed, couldn't stop the Death Eaters from bringing Voldemort back, and has required outside help to survive the other three times that he faced the bastard! Oh, and you haven't heard that damned prophecy yet! Dumbledore was the one who it was told to, so he knew what it said." He quoted it to Ron. "So it's him or me! No two ways about it. He's got easily thirty years of Dark Magic study behind him. Does anyone really think that I stand a chance to survive against him? No matter how much I want to survive and have a happy life with Hermione, I have to face the fact that I am a dead man walking. Talk about a 'power that he knows not' – ha! A room filled with whatever it is? The hints that Dumbledore gave about that power come out to being ridiculous. A room filled with love? How in hell do you quantify that, box it and shelve it?"

He stopped and faced his best friend. "I love her more than I love my own life. How can I let her walk into what is basically a death trap for her?"

Ron looked at his friend for a long moment. "How can you take the decision away from her if you love her as much as you say you do? When does she get a say in the matter? Right now, the three of us are as close to adult as we may ever get. The Department of Mysteries fiasco taught us all how dangerous this thing really is, I think. I could die tomorrow at the hands of the Death Eaters. Guess what, Harry? I still intend to stand behind you in this fight, *knowing that it may well kill me.* V ... Vol ... dammit, I'm going to say the name ... V-Voldemort is evil, and needs to be destroyed. If my death helps that happen, then my death will have been worth it."

"Ask her, Harry. Ask her if she's thought through what this means. Ask the woman who researches *everything* what it might mean to her to be married to the person Vol-Voldemort most wants dead. I guarantee you she's thought about it, and is walking into it with eyes wide open." He grabbed his friend's shoulder. "I am so damned jealous of you, Harry. I'd love to have her love me with the depth ... the *purity* that she loves you. Maybe I'll find that someday. But damn it, if you don't go back in there and talk to her,

and call the September wedding back *on*, I may beat the hell out of you."

Hermione watched the two of her friends out in the lawn, trying hard not to cry. She understood Harry's mood, but it didn't make the pain any less. She watched as Harry began to pace, hands waving as he talked. He was obviously talking loudly, because she could *almost* hear his voice. She watched him stop speaking as he faced Ron.

She found herself wondering what Ron was thinking, and then saw him speak. His words seemed like physical blows to Harry. Ron pointed at the house and she watched Harry's eyes follow and meet hers. Ron said something to Harry, and Harry stood straighter. As he began to walk back to the house, they were surprised by Albus Dumbledore appearing in the yard. Harry nodded at him and stopped long enough to say something, then continued his journey to the house. She opened the door to meet him.

"Harry ..."

"Hermione, what kind of situation are you getting into if you marry me?"

"I'm already on the list of people to kidnap, torture and kill excruciatingly. That moves me to the top of the list. But you know something, Harry? If it keeps you alive long enough to kill Voldemort, then it's worth it. I am in extreme danger being your friend. If I were smarter than I am brave, then I'd back off, but you mean too much to me. Harry James Potter, I love you, and I love you *knowing* that it could lead to my death. My parents are right, as usual. This is a war, and you choose sides. If I am going to die in the fight against the Dark, I want it to be at the side of my husband." She crossed her arms. "Does that answer your question?"

"Yes," he said in a somewhat small voice. Dropping to one knee, he took her hands. "A few minutes ago, I said something foolish and called off our September wedding. Will you do me the honour of forgiving me and agree to marry me on your sixteenth birthday? I do

love you, Hermione – that was part of why I did that. But I took the choice away from you, and that was wrong of me.”

She pulled him to his feet. “Yes, Harry, I forgive you. Besides, we already started the paperwork. It’s too late now to back out,” she laughed. She stopped laughing as he leaned in to kiss her, and while a chaste kiss, it was certainly full of the extreme depths of passionate love that he felt for her. She was extremely glad that they’d both learned that, if you position yourself right, you can breathe through your nose while you kiss. It took Helen Granger tapping their shoulders to get that kiss to stop.

Hermione got her bearings about her and then looked at Professor Dumbledore. “Did the wards drop, sir? You popped into our back yard as if nothing was preventing you.”

“Portkeys are like that, dear girl. As for the wards, well, your anti-Apparition wards are down to about one hundred yards. I expect that they will fluctuate for some time.” His eyes twinkled madly. “I suspect that they shall increase dramatically sometime tonight, after the handfasting has taken place. Eventually they will go away completely, but I expect not until Voldemort has been defeated. So, is everything ready for the ceremony tonight?”

Harry thought for a moment, and then looked to the Grangers. “I can’t think of anything we’ve forgotten. You’ll need to go into your room and get the rings, though.”

Hermione couldn’t help but laugh as Harry’s eyes shot wide, and he slapped his forehead. “The rings! We were so busy with everything else...”

“Then perhaps you should go get them,” Dumbledore smiled.

“Can someone get us to Diagon Alley?” he asked. At the look he received, he replied, “You think any normal ring is going on this woman’s finger? I’m getting her rings as magical as she is!”

“You don’t have to, Harry,” she started to respond.

“If you’re going to do something, do it right,” he answered simply.

Minerva McGonagall chuckled. “Young man’s heart is in the right place, I must admit. Especially after that scene a few minutes ago. Who shall accompany Harry?”

“Well, Hermione needs to, since I want her to decide what she wants to wear on her finger. Beyond that, well, that’s up to you.”

Hermione was actually surprised by her inclusion. “Thank you, Harry.”

Dumbledore spoke up. “If you would not mind a trip into Gringott’s, there may be a solution. Your parents’ wedding rings.”

Harry looked to Hermione. “If you want to see them, Hermione. If you don’t like them, then we get our names in the paper. I’m buying you an engagement ring, however. I haven’t done that yet, and I want you to actually have one before we wed tonight.” He paused. “So, Gringott’s first. Where are the rings stored?”

“In the Potter vaults,” Dumbledore replied. “Shall I come with you? It would perhaps make the process of giving you full access to them considerably easier, since I am currently guardian of them.” He looked to McGonagall, who reached into her handbag and pulled out a small pot. “As prepared as always, Minerva.” He looked to the group and then walked to the fireplace in the Granger home. “It should be used very seldom. This is currently an unregistered Floo connection.” He tossed some powder into the Granger fireplace and said, “Gringott’s bank lobby.”

The fire flared and a goblin’s face appeared. “Purpose for call?”

“To allow for safe passage for a customer who needs privacy – Harry Potter.”

“In thirty seconds, Floo to ‘Kazar’s Office’.” The connection was abruptly broken.

Fifty seconds later, all three of them were standing in a goblin's office. "Mister Dumbledore," said the goblin. "Is it correct to assume that this is in regards to the conversation we had of last week?"

"Yes, it is. I will be transferring guardianship of the Potter vaults to their proper owner, since he is now considered an adult."

"He is but sixteen," the goblin stated.

"He is what the Muggles refer to as an emancipated minor, which makes him adult in their eyes, except for certain small things that I believe he has stated no real interest in, such as tobacco and alcohol." Harry nodded his agreement.

In a few minutes, Harry was the proud and more than slightly nervous owner of a new Gringott's key. A few minutes after that, Griphook, Harry, Hermione, and Dumbledore were standing before the Potter family vault. Albus smiled and said, "You will find this vault overwhelming, perhaps, given your thoughts on the contents of the vault you are used to visiting. This contains many things of a magical nature that your father did not wish to lose when he and your mother moved to Godric's Hollow. When they died, I became caretaker of their wedding rings, and had them brought here." The vault opened to display an astonishing pile of money within. There were also various boxes and chests in the room, and atop one small table was a simple jewellery box. Harry walked over to it and opened it, finding a number of interesting pieces of jewellery in it, but segregated from the rest were three rings and a necklace. Two of the rings were simple in design – a band of gold rose leaves, tips overlapping stems, with a circlet of white gold on either side of the leaf band. The third ring contained diamond and emerald chips on a simple white gold band.

"Oh, they're exquisite!" Hermione breathed. She picked up the wedding bands and looked inside them to the inscriptions inside. "Ooh, runes!"

"What do they say?" Harry asked.

"Hmm," she said slowly, eyes twinkling, "Let's see ... 'One ring to rule them all ...'"

"Hermione!" Harry laughed. "What does it *really* say?"

She was laughing. "I'm sorry Harry, but we both needed the laugh. It really says 'Two hearts, one soul.' Does that make you happier?"

"Much. Question is, do we use them today, or on your birthday?" He paused and dropped to one knee. "The more important question, though, is this: I never actually officially asked for you hand in marriage. We sort of decided that we would get married. Well, I'm making it official." He held out the diamond and emerald ring. "Hermione Granger, will you consent to save the soul of this poor misguided fool, and marry me?"

Her eyes teared quickly, and she slid her finger forward, through the band. "Yes, my poor benighted Harry. I will be your light, if you wish it, and in return, you will be mine." Her couldn't hold back the laugh that came upon her when she saw Harry's evident relief. "Thought I might pull out at this late date, Harry? We're getting married tonight!"

"It was your last chance to ..."

"If you finish that the way I think you were going to, then we'll be consummating the handfasting on a different schedule after you recuperate from your injuries, my soon-to-be husband." She said it with a smile on her face and in her eyes, but with steel in her voice.

He nodded. "So saying '... come to your senses' would have been considered a particularly bad way to finish that sentence?"

She hugged him tightly. "Yes. Aren't you glad you didn't finish it that way?"

He smiled and looked at the necklace. When he picked it up, he gasped. "Professor? Was my mother a Seer or something of the sort?"

"Yes, she had talents in that direction. Why?"

"Hermione, what are the dates listed on the back of this pendant?" It was a large locket style pendant hanging from a gold chain; a simple circle about two inches across.

She took it and her eyes widened. “Today, and my birthday this year! There’s a few more obscured by magic.” She opened the locket and was surprised to see an image hover in the air above the open locket. It was obviously a drawing, but it was the two of them in an embrace filled with love. They were dressed in that which they had been born in, but the work showed nothing that would embarrass them if it were shown in the common room of Gryffindor Tower. It was them as they looked today.

“Mum was an artist as well, apparently,” Harry said thickly.

“I’m not that pretty, am I?” Hermione asked, looking at the picture with awe.

“I’m going to spend the rest of my life trying to convince you that you are,” Harry said, taking her into his arms. “So, let’s head back up topside and get back to your parents house. We have a wedding to attend!”

Back at the Granger home, Harry and Hermione were shocked by how quickly the backyard had changed into a party zone. “I’d ask how you managed this, but the answer is undoubtedly ‘magic’,” Harry breathed.

“Actually, chum,” Ron said from beside him, “it’s the result of having the Weasley family and the Grangers available for all work. Professor McGonagall simply added the occasional touch. Almost everything done here was done in the half hour you were gone, by hand.”

Harry looked to Hermione. “I want to be the kind of parent to the children we’ll someday have that your parents are to you. This is incredible.”

Helen came from behind Harry and hugged him. “Harry, we did this for you too. Our daughter considers you good enough; therefore, you are. Someday you’ll realize that we love you for you, as well as for how you make our daughter feel.” She let go of him and swatted his

rear end. "Now go get dressed. You're one of the guests of honour at a wedding!"

Before he disappeared, he handed the rings to Helen. "Find out from her if she wants to use them today, or wait until September. I'm good on her decision either way."

A few minutes later he was standing on the Granger lawn under an awning, waiting for Hermione to appear. Ron stood next to him, and it was anyone's guess as to which of the two young men was more nervous. Harry looked out into the crowd, and found himself worrying – Fred and George were uncharacteristically solemn.

All that was forgotten, though, the moment that Hermione stepped into view. She was wearing a simple white sundress that somehow simultaneously made Harry think of the eleven year old girl he'd met on the Hogwarts Express, and of a fully mature woman in a full bridal gown. She was wearing a crown of roses in her hair, and a veil fell demurely to her throat. The cut of the dress tried to draw his eyes lower, but he stubbornly stared at the veil. He could see her smiling behind it, and his heart beat faster. *Soon, she'll be my wife! I get to spend the rest of my life with her!* A grin split his face.

He couldn't say what the music was that was playing in the background; only that it was perfect. *Correct that – she's perfect. That makes everything else perfect, even if it starts to rain right now.* Somehow – it seemed sudden – she was beside him, and her hand was in his.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Friends and loved ones, we are gathered here today to solemnize and make official that which these two and the Universe know already – that they are one." He smiled. "I have known these two since their first days at Hogwarts. In the case of Harry, I knew his parents. Today I will admit that I nearly cried with joy the day I saw Hermione Granger step through the doors at Hogwarts, because Lily Evans, a gifted Seer, had a sketchbook full of people she had seen in the future, and this brilliant young woman was as prominent in there as were two particular black haired men. The most striking was the one with the

brilliant green eyes, often in the same picture as this brown haired woman."

"But divination is at best a woolly science," he continued, smiling wider, and three distinct snorts of laughter could be heard being stifled by the bride, groom, and groomsman. "One worries for the future. I have no such worries anymore. They have found each other, and today they pledge themselves to something both greater than themselves and meaningless without them."

They met each others eyes, and mouthed the word that Dumbledore spoke next, in unison with him. "Love." He turned to Harry. "Harry James Potter, do you pledge to love and honour this woman and keep her safe to the best of your ability?"

"With all my heart, with all my soul, until the last breath has left my body, and beyond," Harry responded. A breeze rose under the awning, ruffling the clothes of only Harry and Hermione. She gasped.

Dumbledore turned to Hermione. "Hermione Jane Granger, do you pledge to love and honour this man and keep him safe to the best of your ability?"

She met Harry's eyes, and his breath caught in his throat as she answer the question. "With all my heart, with all my soul, until the very end of time itself." The breeze arose again, lifting her veil to him, but this breeze went through the audience, leaving no one with dry eyes.

Albus spoke again, his own voice thick. "Their own words have sealed this marriage before the Universe. All that is left for me is to make it official. By the powers vested in my by the International Wizengamot, of which I am once again Chief Wizard, I pronounce you what we already know you to be – husband and wife." He smiled widely. "You may kiss, if you choose."

Hermione pulled Harry close and kissed him, and he suddenly realized that this was going to be an interesting party for him. He wanted nothing more than to consummate this union, especially when he realized that the only thing under Hermione's wedding dress was

his wife ... *My God! My wife!* He picked her up and spun her around, their lips never breaking contact.

They came to their senses to loud applause from the assembled small crowd. Hermione leaned over. "Don't worry, Harry," she murmured. "We decided to use the wedding rings in September. We can wear them now, but it will cause questions at school."

"Question," he murmured back. "I'd like to scream it from the rooftops, and take out a full page ad in every newspaper in England, Muggle and wizard, but I'll understand if you choose to hide our marriage until September."

"Are you *mad*, Mr. Potter?" she asked in a normal voice. "I think you'd waste your money taking out advertisements in the Muggle papers, and all we have to do for the wizard papers is do exactly what I intend to – insist that people call me Mrs. Potter." She blushed. "The worst thing is admitting that Rita Skeeter was right."

"I can live with that," Harry said. "After all, I get to live with you." He laughed. "For the rest of my life!" he shouted to the skies.

"No, chum, tell us what you really feel about this," Ron said with a laugh. The crowd came around them, congratulating them.

As the twins approached, Harry looked at them sideways. "What are you two planning? You were way too solemn during the ceremony. Is the cake going to explode?"

"Harry ..." Fred said.

"... our brother ..." added George.

"You wound us!"

"No, I know you. When you get all innocent, then you've got a big one planned. So what is it? If you ruin my wedding day – well, remember that I am the son of a Marauder, and the remaining

Marauder is a friend of mine." He grinned at them. "If we are pranked tonight, then I guarantee you that you will regret it."

"Honestly, Harry ..." George started.

"... we wouldn't do that on your wedding day. We were more thinking of the fact that, well ..."

"... when this gets out, we're going to be sinking the profits from the shop into financing the weddings that the girls are going to insist upon."

Harry laughed. "Is that all?" He looked them deeply in the eyes. "If you could afford it, would you marry them?"

"Yeah!" George exclaimed.

"In a heartbeat!" Fred added.

"No problem," Harry said. "You're family to me, and family helps finance these sort of endeavours. Get what I'm saying?"

The entire Weasley family was staring at him. Hermione simply smiled and said, "I love this man."

The party began in earnest, finally, and the couple danced their first dance together. As their bodies swayed together, Harry murmured, "If we don't find a way to politely leave this party, Hermione, I don't think there will be any doubt about whether or not we consummated this marriage." He gently nibbled her ear. "Knowing that the only thing between my hands and your body is that thin dress is driving my crazy." He pulled back slightly and looked her in the eyes. "I need you," he said, allowing all the passion and lust he felt right now to come into his eyes.

She gasped, and then smiled. "Well, it may be rude, but there's always being direct." As the dance ended, she looked to the assembled group. "You can stay and enjoy yourselves," she announced to the group, "but Harry and I have some business to attend to. I somehow don't think we'll be seeing anyone before tomorrow afternoon at the earliest." Her eyes twinkled.

As they headed into the house, Harry couldn't help but chuckle as he heard McGonagall, of all people, calling to Hermione, "Just remember that he needs to be able to form coherent sentences by September first, Mrs. Potter!"

Author's Note:

I simply could not think of a good song for them to dance to, so I left it out. I'll entertain suggestions – I just insist that it be a song that was on the charts in July of 1996, at the latest. No 2003-2004 Shania Twain, no matter how perfect it might be.

The engagement ring, and wedding rings, exist. They currently reside on the hands of myself and my own wonderful wife. (No runic inscription inside, though.)

Stay tuned for another NC-17 chapter, wherein we find out what silk ropes, ice cubes, chocolate pudding, and Hedwig (among other things) have to do with their wedding night...

Chapter 10

Before they reached the door to Hermione's bedroom, Harry stopped her. As she began to turn toward him, looking puzzled, he swooped her off her feet. "Tradition demands that I carry my bride across the threshold." He kissed her rather thoroughly on the lips as she put her arms around his neck. As he set her down, he began to gently bite his lower lip, because he could see her nipples straining slightly against the cloth. With a slight smile, he tenderly captured one between his teeth, and began to gently suck, feeling the cloth wetting in his mouth.

"Harry, couldn't you wait?" she moaned quietly.

"Why should I?" he replied, disengaging for a moment, pleased to see that the fabric had gone transparent. "Gods, one of these days I am getting you outdoors in the rain in that dress."

She giggled. "So, when we eventually go somewhere on our honeymoon, should I enter one of those wet T-shirt contests?"

"Wouldn't be fair to the other girls," he replied seriously as he captured the other one and repeated the performance while teasing the first one with his fingers.

When he let go, she looked him in the eyes. "You really do believe that it wouldn't be fair to the other girls, don't you?"

He looked at her, his hands gently grabbing the material of the dress and pulling up as he spoke. "It wouldn't. You're the most beautiful girl at Hogwarts, and we have some beautiful girls there." He kept pulling and soon had pulled it over her head, leaving her in only the shoes that she quickly kicked off her feet. "I don't think putting you up against other women is fair."

While it sounded like flattery to her, she could see in his eyes that he was stating a simple truth as he saw it. Her heart came into her eyes and she flowed into his arms. "Oh Harry, I've never felt beautiful before, and then you say things like that. If I didn't love you before, I'd be falling for you for ... oh, Harry, you believe it!"

"And maybe someday you will, too. I wish I could let you see yourself through my eyes. Would you like to know when I first started having fantasies about you?"

"Why do I think you're going to say the night of the Yule Ball in our fourth year?"

"Because that was it. I looked up the stairs, and there was this ... this goddess walking down the stairs."

"Harry ..." she said, putting her hands on her waist.

Harry watched rapturously as her breasts bounced slightly. Tearing his eyes back to her own, he replied, "I'm serious! Why do you think that date with Parvati went so badly? Here I was, staring at my best friend and not understanding all the different feelings running through me? Jealousy, something I came to discover was love, and certainly something making my pants fit a bit oddly." He grinned and pointed at his outfit. "See? You still do that to me!"

"Hmm, what I see is a vast inequity. I'm nude, and you're fully dressed. Rectify this situation immediately, Mister Potter!"

He snapped to attention, saluting. "Immediately, Mrs. Potter!" he grinned. As he began to take off his jacket, he said, "Will I ever be able to make you understand just how ... how wonderful – how perfect it is to call you that, and have it be true?"

"Who knows? But you've got easily a hundred years minimum to show me." Her hands came up and started unbuttoning his shirt. When she was done, her hands slid under the fabric and began to run across his muscled chest. "Mm, I'm going to enjoy this over those next hundred years." She hummed with pleasure as she felt him shiver under her fingertips. She slid her hands around to his back and hugged him, her bare breasts against his chest.

He shucked the jacket and shirt onto the floor and reached down to undo his trousers. She beat him there, and began fumbling with the fastenings. "Aren't I supposed to be the nervous one?" he laughed.

"I think we're both nervous, Harry. This is our first time as a married couple. Even if the law doesn't see us that way, everyone out there does. And whatever passes for a god out there does too, I suppose."

He gently removed her hands and finished the job of undoing his trousers, but let her pull them off. She flowed against him again, now that there was only skin, and he could feel her shiver slightly. "Are you scared, honey?"

She looked into his eyes, and the naked hunger there surprised him. "No, Mister Potter. I'm trying to keep from picking you up and throwing you onto the bed. I want you and I need you, and I'm going to have you." She blushed furiously. "I wanted to take you out there, I was so worked up."

"Well, that obviously makes two of us then." He swooped her feet off the floor to the sound of a delighted shriek from Hermione, and carried her to the bed. Her arms came around his neck, and when he set her on the bed, she refused to let go.

"Harry, make me yours. I think we're both sufficiently aroused right now – I know I'm considering the entire ceremony foreplay." She shivered in what he assumed was anticipation. "I spent the entire time from Gringott's to right now with a little part of me thinking about what we're about to do. I'm going to explode like a Christmas cracker whether you touch me or not."

He grinned widely and lay down beside her, pressing his body against hers. She ground gently against him, pressing his erection between them. "Keep that up, my wife, and we'll have to wait for a while, since I'll explode at the wrong time." He looked in her eyes and received the answer to the question he hadn't even asked, so he repositioned himself. As he placed the tip of his erection against her opening, he laughed. "I feel like a virgin again, scared that I won't please you – that you won't enjoy yourself."

She surprised him by quickly lifting her legs, locking them behind him, and then grabbing him by the buttocks and pulling him inside her. He was even more astonished with just how deeply inside her he slid. "Oh God YES!" she squealed into the air. "I need you, Harry!"

He didn't need any further impetus, and began to gently slide back and forth – maddeningly slowly for her. "Faster, Harry! Fuck me!" Her sudden usage of language she never used before excited him, knowing that he was the reason. He sped up, and her moaning sped up and began to get louder. She was no longer making noises that anyone could mistake for words, but none could mistake the meaning if they heard. Rather quickly, he had driven her over the edge with his now rapid thrusts, and she in turn pulled him over as she rippled maddeningly against him.

As they lay together in the afterglow, Harry still inside her, she put her arms around him and kissed him rather thoroughly. "Thank you, Mr. Potter. You have no worries about pleasing me, I can inform you now. And now, by all mystical means I am aware of, we are truly man and wife."

His eyes shot wide. "You mean"

She looked at him, rather puzzled, for just a moment, and then realized what he was thinking. "Oh no, Harry. Not yet. I'm still using contraceptives. I'd like to wait until my sixteenth birthday before I even begin to think about trying to get pregnant. I'd much prefer to wait until I'm done with at least Hogwarts, if not University, but if I get told that it will keep you safe, then we start working on it on September nineteenth." He hugged him tightly, even squeezing him gently with the muscles still surrounding his organ. "I've finally gotten the man of my dreams, so altering some of my other, more minor dreams is a small price to pay to keep him alive."

He kissed her gently, feeling himself stiffening inside her again. She giggled. "Ooo, I'd ask what you have in mind, but I think we're of the same mind, my husband." He began to gently stroke in and out, drawing delighted long moans from the girl beneath him. They became more insistent as the strokes continued, and she began to growl at him to go faster, but he refused, continuing his long slow rhythmic thrusts. Her moaning came back, and became louder and far more insistent. "Harry," she groaned as he finished one particularly slow, delicious in-thrust. "I need you faster. Are you going to make me talk dirty to you again?"

"You can, but I'm keeping it slow, beloved. If you're like this right now, imagine your orgasm," he chuckled quietly in her ear.

She merely closed her eyes and smiled beatifully at the thought, and continued to moan with each stroke. By the time she orgasmed again, she was nearly screaming her passion to the skies. Harry spent in her again as she passed out from the over-stimulation.

She awoke to Harry laying beside her, gently running his hand along the skin of her stomach. "You're looking forward to the day that there's a baby in there, aren't you?"

"Well, I won't deny that someday would be nice, but I was actually just admiring your body." He blushed. "I won't deny that practicing planting a baby is something I've been looking forward to." He looked over to the clock. "Care to see if anyone is still here at the moment, beloved? I find that exercise makes me hungry and thirsty."

She looked at him for a long moment, and smiled. Some men would say such a thing to swagger and brag that they had just had sex, but Harry's statement was simple truth – he was hungry for more than simply her body. She got out of bed, more than a little wobbly, and walked over to her dress. "Harry, my love, I'm going to need to lean on you for a while, I think. I'm a little weak after what you've done to me."

"What I've done to you?" he laughed. "I seem to recall you being a rather willing participant. But I'll take full blame if you insist. I request the right, however to claim that I had a certain inspiration," he grinned, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

"You're not exactly uninspiring yourself, good sir," she laughed in reply as she picked up her dress and slid it over her body while he slid into trousers and shirt. "I'll prove that to you a little later tonight."

They exited the room and looked out into the garden, which still had quite the party going. As they stepped into it, the assembled group erupted into applause. Hermione's father stepped forward, shaking his head. "Kids, it's at a time like this that I recall the words of my

sainted grandmother – ‘Love may be blind, but the neighbours are rarely deaf.’ Fred, George, Ron, and even Ginny then immediately snapped to attention and saluted Harry, who immediately turned beet red.

Albus stepped forward. “It might interest you to know that this handfasting removed the restrictions on underage magic from the both of you,” he said, his eyes twinkling madly. “Silencing spells will not cause a suddenly inflow of owls to the property.”

“We’re not going to live this down, are we?” Hermione asked wearing her own blush, laughing as the assembled crowd smiled at her and shook their heads ‘no’ in unison.

Ginny giggled at her for a moment. “The question we’re all wondering though, Hermione, is whether he’s any good as a lover? Give us your honest opinion.” The wide grin on Hermione’s face made her laugh even harder.

Fred looked at the two of them. “Harry, old friend, old chum, I have only one question to ask you, and I really hope you won’t be offended by it. You just got married, and consummated the marriage. What the hell are you doing out here, rather than taking advantage of your teenage Quidditch star stamina in there with her?!” He grinned. “Hell, if you’re not going to …” He leered at Hermione.

“Sorry, Fred, but Harry and I don’t share,” she smiled. “Thank you for the compliment, however. Besides, do you really think that your soon-to-be fiancée would share you?” At the twinkle in both his and George’s eyes, she laughed and amended, “Too much information, thank you very much! And as for what we’re doing out here, we forgot to get any food. We’re going to need to keep our strength up in there, after all.”

Harry’s plate resembled Ron’s at Hogwarts when Hermione looked at him next. “Harry!”

“Inspiration, dear, remember?” He wiggled his eyebrows, pulling a blush from her. “I need my strength for everything we have planned!”

"Harry, we'll have the rest of our lives together to explore and experiment! No need to do it all tonight!"

"But if we have the stamina ..." he laughed. "Ooh, chocolate pudding!" His eyes took on a wicked look. "I'm just going to nick this one bowl" When she looked at him questioningly, he let the lust burning below the surface come into his eyes for just a moment, and she gasped.

"Oh my, Harry! Where did this horny beast come from?" she whispered in his ear as she pulled him close.

"He was always there. He just expected to die alone and unloved," he whispered back. "Thank you for proving him wrong."

"Harry, you've gotten uncharacteristically poetic since we've been together. Why is that?"

"I think it's because ... well, maybe it's ... y'know, I'm not really sure. It's stuff I'd like to have said to you, so now I can."

"I think you're also afraid you'll lose me if you stop saying things poetically. I'm not asking you to stop, but go back to being my Harry, okay? The occasional flowery statement is okay, but too much and it loses its meaning." She kissed his cheek. "I'm staying, Harry. Don't worry about that."

"I guess I just worry. I've never really had anything good in my life, and now that things are turning around, I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. You know – Vernon will get off on his charges and Dudley will come after us, especially after learning that we've just caused the amount of money coming into the house to drop dramatically. The Ministry will decide somehow that it's all my fault and come to snap my wand and kick me out into the Muggle world to live." He looked into her eyes. "I know I'm not supposed to feel this way on this day of all days, but I am so afraid that I'm going to suddenly wake up in the Dursley house in the second bedroom and discover that this summer has been a dream, and that you and Ron are dating and serious about each other." He shook his head. "I need cheering up. Shall we adjourn again?" He forced a grin onto his face.

"Yes, I think we should," she answered, "but first we should actually eat some of this wonderful food prepared for our wedding." She pointed over to the head of the table. "We have a wedding cake to cut, after all." She turned to the crowd. "The bouquet will be thrown in September, after that wedding." They walked to the cake and were handed a knife, and rather deftly cut two slices of cake. Harry picked up one and fed it carefully to Hermione, who ate it in such a manner that she could tell Harry's trousers were starting to fit him interestingly, as had been her plan. He retaliated when she fed him his piece by managing to lick frosting off the piece in a manner that made her nipples tighten until they hurt. His eyes twinkled at her.

"Thank you for not mashing cake in my face, Hermione. I always thought that was so ... disrespectful to your partner."

"I had better things to do with the cake," she purred at him as she ate from the plate she prepared.

"If you keep acting like that, Hermione," he whispered, "don't think I won't make it obvious to everyone that the marriage has been consummated. I *will* make love to you in this lawn, in front of these people if you keep teasing me like this."

Her eyes twinkled, but she toned back the seductiveness of her actions. "Maybe another time, good sir," she chuckled. They finished their meals in relative peace, carrying on conversations with the guests, and generally enjoying themselves. Finally, they decided that they were finished, and stood.

"You won't be seeing us again tonight, folks," Hermione said. "I have a husband to make up to for all my teasing out here, and I have a few interesting ideas on how to do that." Her eyes met Minerva's for just a moment, and both women's eyes sparkled with amusement.

Harry blinked for a moment. It was obvious from looking at him that he was having trouble wrapping his brain around the concept of Hermione getting sexual advice from their Transfiguration professor. Hermione smiled and took his hand, leading him into the house. "See you later, people!" she smiled.

Back in the bedroom, she grabbed her wand and flicked it twice, and they were once again nude. Another and all external sounds ceased. "Harry, do you trust me?"

"With my body, my heart, and my soul, Hermione," he said seriously.

She chuckled slightly. "Thank you, but a simple yes would have sufficed. Lay down on the bed, on your back, and raise your arms over your head." He did what she asked, and as his arms went over his head, ropes snaked from the corners and gently tied his wrists and ankles down.

"Hermione?" he asked in some alarm.

"This is why I asked if you trust me. I know you like to have your hands all over my body, and I'm not complaining about that. But how will you react to me making love to you, where you can't do anything but move slightly and lay back and enjoy?" She lay down on the bed atop him. "Harry, you give me great pleasure, and take great pleasure from doing so. It's my turn to do nothing but make you happy, okay?" She punctuated her words with a fervent kiss to his lips that she ended with Harry still straining for more. "Exactly, Harry. Delicious torture."

"Just you wait until I get to the chocolate pudding, woman," he growled deep in his throat, grinning as he said it.

She smiled. "Thanks for reminding me. I promise to leave some for you." As she turned to grab the bowl, there was a knock at the window, and they both looked to see Hedwig tapping the glass. Hermione stood to open the window, and came face to face with Ginny, who blushed profusely as she realized what Hermione was wearing. Hermione dropped the silencing spell to talk to her.

"I was going to grab Hedwig and keep her from interrupting you," she squeaked.

"Thanks, but I think Hedwig has other ideas," Hermione said as the snowy owl gave Ginny a dirty look. "Why are you blushing? We've shared a room before, Ginny. You've seen me nude."

"Yeah, but I'd never interrupted your ... um"

"We hadn't started yet. I'd just gotten him tied down and was reaching for the chocolate pudding when Hedwig knocked." Hermione giggled as Ginny's eyes went wide, and she had a feeling that Ginny was going to have tired fingers that night. Hermione leaned out the window slightly to see no one else around. "Poke your head in the window, Ginny," she whispered.

Ginny did so, took one look at the bed, and pulled her head out the window again so fast that Hermione felt the breeze. "My God, he's ... it's ... oh my God"

"It's perfect," Hermione whispered. "Happy fantasizing," she said as she pulled her head back in and recast the *Silencio*.

Hedwig had hopped her way over to the edge of the bed, and was looking at Harry in a look that made Hermione think that the owl was amused. "Are you laughing at me, girl?" Harry asked with some embarrassment. The owl hopped from one foot to the other.

Hermione reached out and gently pet the owl. "Your feathers are so soft, Hedwig." Her eyes sparkled. "I wish I had a feather duster this soft to torture Harry with. He'd love it."

Hedwig looked at Hermione for a moment and held out her wing. "What is it, girl?" Harry asked. Hedwig looked at the two of them again and shook the wing lightly. When neither of them responded, she shook harder, and a single feather detached and began to float to the ground.

Hermione picked it up. "Is this your present to us, Hedwig? Something for me to torture Harry with?" In answer, the owl gently nipped Hermione's finger and then took to the air, heading back outside. She turned back to Harry. "Even your owl thinks I should torture you."

With a twinkle in her eye, she reached over and stroked the feather across his chest, taking care to caress his nipples with it. The shuddering breath he drew made her smile, and the feather lazily trailed down the length of his body. When she reached his erection,

she slid the feather past, and stroked it down his right leg, carefully and gently, making him moan quietly. The sound became a bit louder when she reversed the trip up his left leg. It was then that she 'accidentally' let the feather brush against his testicles, and the gasp was all the applause she needed. She touched him more deliberately with the feather, and began to run the soft owl feather along the length of his erect shaft.

When she noted that he was biting his lower lip and whimpering, she stopped for a moment. "Whimpering, Harry? Is something wrong?" she asked impishly.

"Do you have any idea what you're doing to me?" he growled as seductively as he could manage. "You're driving me crazy here!"

She chuckled evilly. "Then you'll have gone completely barking mad by the time I'm done with you, Mister Potter." She lowered her mouth to his erection and began to gently lick the tip as if it her a lollipop. That didn't last long, though, as she surrounded him with her mouth and began to slide him into her mouth. As he reached the back of her throat, she thought, *Thank the gods I don't have a strong gag reflex..* She grinned and completely disengaged from him. "Need to reposition myself to really torture you, Harry." She straddled him, her knees to either side of his chest, and swallowed him whole. This time she allowed him entry to her throat. His pubic hair tickled against her nose. *Now might be a bad time to sneeze*, she thought with amusement. She suddenly felt warm breath tickling her slit, and moaned slightly. The groan that erupted from him at the noise in her throat gave her an idea. Her right hand moved back to between her legs and began to gently tease where Harry was so obviously intent on getting access to in some way. She rested on her left arm while she began to hum Bach's 'Minuet in G major'. She would pull back occasionally in order to breathe, but she kept humming as she teased both herself and Harry. A chuckle would sneak into her humming when he would occasionally thrust upward.

Suddenly, she heard him growl, an almost feral sound, and felt him swell very slightly in her mouth. *Oh my! I actually made him ... oh gods ... I think I'm gonna ...* Her thought processes stopped as she heard him nearly howl as he made one final upward thrust, and then

she felt his orgasm pulsing down her throat. She tried to continue to hum, but between her fingers and the elation she felt at having successfully brought him to orgasm with only her mouth, her own release followed shortly behind his. She pulled back instinctively to breathe and he slipped out from between her lips, still orgasming. She panted as her own tore through her, and she finally collapsed atop him.

As she came to herself again, she heard Harry asking her to move. "Why?" she panted.

"Because you're just far enough away, and my tongue isn't long enough," he laughed, a sound of humour mixed with a little desperation. She moved again, drawing further away from his mouth, which drew a groan of frustration from him. "Please, Hermione? Let me show you how much I appreciated that. Please?" he pleaded.

"Later, my beloved. You spend all your time when we make love making sure I enjoy it. Your pleasure is secondary. Well, now you get to understand that it's primary to *me*, Harry. The only reason I haven't fought it more, other than just how damned good you are, is that I see how happy you are when you give me pleasure. I just want you to lay there and let me pleasure you, my husband. Make you as happy as you make me." She climbed off him, and turned around to kiss him. "Do you want to know how happy I am that I manage to make you come with only my mouth?"

"About as happy as I was our first time to discover that I was able to make you happy with nothing but my tongue, I'd imagine." He smiled. "Look at what you do to me. I'm already recovering. I want you, Hermione." The last was said with the beginnings of a growl.

She smiled. "And you'll have me, for all our lives. Right now, though, it's my turn with the chocolate pudding. I'll leave some for you; don't worry." She carefully spooned pudding onto strategic areas of his body – his chest, some on his stomach, and a generous dollop on the object of her desire. She then proceeded to run her tongue down his body, carefully licking the sweet dessert from the areas she had just covered, taken special care to lick and suck at his nipples. "Just to

be sure I got it all," she purred at him after taking a quick break to breathe. His own breathing was coming rapidly, mixed with moans.

"You're an evil woman, Hermione," he growled. "Where did you learn all this from?"

"Reading," she replied smugly.

"I begin to understand the joys of reading now," he murmured as her tongue slid across his stomach. He became incoherent, however, when she began working in earnest at getting the pudding removed from his erection. She licked this time, rather than sucking on his length, and she was rewarded with various twitches and shivers from him. Finally, gripping the base, she slid her mouth over him again and applied suction as she slid back and forth on him. He didn't last very long after that, and exploded into her mouth again.

She sat up again, grinning widely. He smiled at her, his emotions in his eyes, and her breath caught, even through the grin. "That really makes you happy, doesn't it?" he asked. "Knowing that you can do that with your mouth?"

"Harry, you have no idea. It's not that I can do that specific thing, it's that I'm making you so happy. That you enjoy me doing it makes me happy." She looked into his eyes. "We really ought to clean up a little, Harry. Care for our first shower together as husband and wife?"

"You'll have to untie me, you know," he smiled at her.

She flicked her wand, and he was untied. He sat up and took her into his arms, and she was surprised to feel him shivering. "I'm sorry, Harry!" she said in alarm. "I didn't mean to make you shiver ... was I doing something wrong? You should have told me!" Tears leapt to her eyes.

"Shh," he said, petting her hair. "There's nothing wrong. I'll let you tie me to the bed whenever you want, Hermione. I just ... ever feel an emotion so strongly that you just physically can't let it out, because ... well, it's too big to be released, I guess? That's why I'm shivering, love. If how much I love you were to be released from me all at once, I'd probably explode. And not just the way you managed with that

delectable mouth.” He pulled her close and kissed her hard. She knew he could taste himself on her, and she could tell that he simply didn’t care – kissing her was the most important thing in the world right now.

“Wow,” was all she could say when the kiss broke. “I think I understand what Heinlein meant about Mike’s kissing in *Stranger in a Strange Land*. You do it too. Wow.” She shook her head, and then smiled and took his hand and placed it over her heart. “Feel that pounding? That was from your kiss, lover.” She stood. So how about that shower?”

Harry stood, and then surprised Hermione by swooping her off her feet again. “I’ll carry you there, love.” He walked toward the bathroom that he and Hermione shared. “Hmm, should I keep that room, or should we rearrange things and turn it into our study and use this as purely our bedroom?”

“Worry later, Harry. I want a nice sexy shower with you.” Her arms were around his neck again, and she nibbled his ear gently.

“I’m discovering that I like this. How about I carry you to all the classes we share?”

“I doubt that’s a good idea,” she murmured in his ear. “I don’t think that the two of us making love in front of the teachers is a good idea.” She giggled. “Well, the making love is. It’s the ‘in front of the teachers’ that would be bad.”

They stood by the shower stall for a moment. “The problem with this is that I have to let go of you. I don’t want to!” He smiled afterwards, and looked over to the tub that was in this room. “Big tub. Looks big enough for two people.”

Her eyes sparkled. “I’ve had bubble baths in there. Wonderful tub. Bubbles tickling my nipples as I soak. It is big enough for two, if they’re friendly enough,” she purred.

"Another thought for another day, my sweet. Let's pin you against the wall of that shower."

"Why Harry! One would almost think all you had on your mind was sex!"

He set her down, and headed into his own room for a moment, coming back with his wand. "Forgot. See, my mind isn't only on sex – just mostly. *Silencio!*"

Once the water was running, they stepped into the shower together, and Harry immediately grabbed the soap and stepped behind her. He quickly built a lather and then began to run his hands along her body. He had her panting within seconds as he paid special attention to her nipples. As his left hand stayed teasing her nipples, his right slid down, found her clitoris and began teasing her mercilessly. He loved the way she pressed back against his erection as she moaned and squirmed beneath his hands. "Oh gods Harry, fuck me! If you love me, fuck me!"

He didn't need to be told twice. His hands came down and gripped her hips, and he pulled her back in order to make slipping inside her easier. He began to slowly drive into her, and she tried to push back to meet him, but he held her where she was. "My turn, beloved. My turn to torture you."

She whimpered, but let him set the pace. Soon he was pressed tightly against the rear end he could spend years looking at, and he murmured in her ear, "When you can, please wear clothes to show off your figure, Hermione. You have perfect breasts and a magnificent ass, and when you don't have to wear Hogwarts clothes, you should dress to show off your body."

"You ... you just want ... to brag ..." she panted. "Make 'em ... make 'em all hot ... bothered ... then tell ... with you ... oh God less talk more fuck ... please?" He laughed quietly in her ear and began to pick up the speed to his thrusts, helping her back thrusts by pulling her closer. He knew she was nearing the orgasm she so wanted – he'd gotten used to the interesting ripple that happened about a minute before – so he suddenly stopped after one in-thrust. "No ..." she moaned. "Wanna come ... want it now!" That last came out as a

growl, and she tried to pull away from him, but he held her close. As he felt her slide back down from the precipice, he began to thrust into her again with some gentle force – enough to make a slapping noise as their bodies met. This time he chose to let her slide over the cliff into her waiting pleasure, and followed her quickly.

"Oh my God, Harry – that was five orgasms for you so far tonight! Did you discover some spell to give you stamina like that?"

"Well, you are bewitching," he smiled back at her. "In answer to your question, though – no. I'm sixteen and with a girl crazy enough to love me and want to *make love to me*. Inspiration, my dear wife. Inspiration."

As he slid out of her, she turned and held him tightly. "Harry, even if it wasn't required for your safety, I'd marry you all over again. I adore you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. And I want to spend the rest of my life making sure you believe that you deserve it."

He kissed her lips gently. "When you say it, Hermione, I begin to. I have to think it's true. How else would a woman as magnificent as you fall for me? Makes no sense otherwise. I just have to keep that feeling in me when you're not right there to tell me over and over." He smiled at her. "I must be worth it, though. After all, *you love me.*"

She sniffed happily against his chest. "I love you."

"I love you too, Hermione."

"I think we're finally tiring each other out. Care to go into the kitchen with me? We can take the pudding in to be refrigerated and used another time, get something to drink, and then go to bed. You've tired me out, my love!"

"I can agree with that. We've got our whole lives to experiment." He climbed from the stall and pulled her into a towel and rubbed her down to dry her.

"Ooh, I like this," she sighed. "Service from a Quidditch god, who makes me feel warm and tingly in so many ways." She kissed him again, and the towel dropped to the floor as his arms came around her to hug her.

Eventually they made their way into the kitchen with the remainder of the pudding, which Hermione carefully put away. There was a lemonade pitcher on the counter, so Hermione poured two glasses. They found it a bit warm, so Harry opened the freezer and pulled out some ice cubes and dropped them into the drinks. With an evil twinkle in his eyes, he brushed his cold fingertips across her left nipple, drawing a startled "Harry!" from her. With a smile that matched that twinkle, he opened the freezer and pulled out another ice cube.

"Read about this in one of Dudley's discarded magazines." He brushed the ice cube across her nipple, and drew a ragged erotic gasp from her. "Oh, that must be cold. Let me warm you up." As soon as he had removed the ice, his lips surrounded the erect nipple, and the sudden shift from cold to hot made her moan. He repeated this with the other nipple, and received another delighted moan.

"Harry, I think that it's my *duty* to be your wife," she moaned. "If this is how you are with only me as your lover, and no prior experience, then you'd kill other women once you were more skilled. I need to save all the women of the world from your deliciously evil erotic skills." She whimpered as the ice touched her lips, and he followed quickly with a kiss. "Please, let me save the world by being your victim for life," she said.

"For the good of the world, then, I agree." He kissed her again, and then knelt in front of her. The ice cube came gently up to her slit, and she nearly screamed as it touched her – not from shock, but from how painfully erotic it was. The ice slid carefully forward, and suddenly it was pressing against her clitoris.

Oh my God, is it actually throbbing? It feels like it! Oh God, now he's warming me up with his tongue ... I'll die a happy woman at least. She grinned widely as the ice came back to tease her clitoris, and then be removed to be warm by Harry's eager mouth. Finally, she

could take it no more. "Harry," she whispered, "please make me come, either with your mouth, or with that red hot iron rod you carry with you all the time. Just make me come. Please?"

She saw his smile, and he stood, sliding into her one more time. *Oh, thank the gods for athlete stamina!* Without thinking, her legs came up to lightly wrap around his waist, and he began to thrust into her. Neither of them lasted very long, to be honest – he had driven her fairly close to the edge, and he had obviously been very turned on by her reactions.

Once they had finished their lemonades, they helped each other into the bedroom, they would share from now on, and slid into bed together, quickly falling into a contented slumber, wrapped in each others arms. Hedwig sat on the window sill and hooted softly as if to say that all was right with the world.

Chapter 11

What a month or so this has been, Helen Granger thought as she stood in the darkened kitchen, looking out at the sky. There was some light pollution from London, but that didn't hide all the stars. Meeting Hermione's boy from school – I mean really meeting him; discovering that the Dursley family are even worse than we thought; marrying our daughter off to this boy to keep him safe; discovering that we actually love him ourselves as he is ... what a month!

She shook her head. *Hermione's got good taste in men, though, she chuckled to herself. Far too much self-hatred, but given his upbringing, that's not a surprise. Even given that history, he's probably the most caring and over-all loving young men I've ever met.* She saw her daughter in the garden, also looking up at the stars. She was in the grass, on her back. Helen chuckled. *Kids don't know I saw them last night out there – married a week, and I think they've made love everywhere around this house that they can. I know they've tried out the shower and the tub, and caught them in here once – Harry having what I suspect is becoming his favourite meal.* She felt her own nipples stiffen as she remembered the sheer joy on her daughter's face. Neither had realized she was there, and she had backed away quickly – and Doug had certainly not complained about her mood when she returned to bed. *It's too bad about that injury he took when Hermione was eighteen months old – would have been nice to have given her a brother or sister. We've certainly been active enough to have rivalled the Weasleys for family size.*

Harry was so funny when he finally realized that we all shave – he'd known about Hermione because of that day at the beach, but seeing even Doug clean shaven? Now even Harry shaves, after his handfasting night. She laughed softly into the dark night. I'd imagine the thought of Hermione sneezing while deep-throating him scared him or something. I wonder where he is right now? He'd usually be out there with her, trying to ... distract her. She must have tired him out.

She loved this time of night, when there was only enough light in the house to light your way without tripping, but not enough to be distracted by all the things that might need doing – barely enough light to see your hands in front of your face, but it was enough for her – and apparently Harry as well. She was always a night person, and she'd discovered that Harry had developed that habit in the last few months. Neither of them had night fears – he'd had so much done to him over the years that mere darkness in a house couldn't scare him. They'd had some interesting, and to be honest, frightening conversations in these last few weeks, sometimes joined by Hermione, sometimes not. The horrors that she had heard Harry talk about, and the depth of pain that he had experienced was beyond belief sometime. Part of her wanted to yank her daughter from that world – pull her home and keep her safe. But then she would hear Harry talk about Hermione, and realize that she might well be the only thing keeping Harry sane. *Besides, this Voldemort person hates people like Doug and I, so that makes us no safer, having her home. And as a friend of Harry's? More danger than I care to think about. She's actually safer with him than without him.*

She heard the gentle pad of bare feet come into the kitchen, and she opened her mouth to say something, but heard a quiet, "Shh," and smiled, especially when fingers gently began tracing lines along her back. *God, I love it when Doug gets like this. He's going to get a surprise, I think. I was about to go jump him – something about having two horny teenagers in the house gets me hot and bothered.* She began to shudder deliciously under his gentle ministrations.

His hands came around her gently, caressing her stomach, and she felt it quiver in anticipation. She felt his cock nestle against her rear end, but she was far more interested in those hands at the moment. They slid up to cup her breasts, and his fingers gently teased the straining nipples for a few wonderful moments before his right hand slid back down her body, teasing her stomach, then tickling her smooth pubic area, before sliding to his real destination. She was already quite prepared for the delightful intrusion, and as always, Doug's fingers searched for her clitoris. Finding it, he proceeded to perform his magnificent torture. *He loves doing it in this position. I think he enjoys the way I feel when I grind my ass against him.* She

punctuated her thought by doing just that, and felt him respond by pressing forward slightly. *God, I love that feeling almost as much as feeling him in me*, she thought happily. *Knowing I do that to him still makes me giddy after all these years.*

She felt that familiar quiver in her stomach and against his fingers – one that Hermione apparently shared with her, she'd learned in their talks – one that signalled an impending explosion. Just before she could fall into it, he stopped, causing an intake of breath on her part. She could feel his smile as he brushed his lips across her shoulder, and thrilled as his hands moved to her hips. *God, yes!* He pulled her backward a bit, to make entering her easier, and then touched the tip of his cock to her eager opening. He slid slowly but easily into her. *Those exercises have definitely paid off – this is a tighter fit than I'm used to! Oh God yes!*

His thrusts were maddening – he'd slip out rapidly, but slide back in slowly. She could feel him twitching slightly, and she knew he was about to come. *Good, we'll do it together*, she thought as she felt her own release screaming to be let loose. She felt herself starting to ripple against him, and his delighted hiss as he breathed in was music to her ears. A moment later, he was pressed against her as hard as he could manage as he spilled his orgasm into her just a moment ahead of her own crashing through her.

As she felt the last of his twitches inside her, she moaned out, "I think we're going to have to have them move in with us permanently, Doug. It's had a great effect on you." She felt him stiffen, and not in a good way, and then felt him yank out of her. As she spun, she saw the outline of a man definitely not her husband, tearing down the hallway. As she heard a slam, she called out his name – "Harry! Oh my god – Harry!"

The door to the back opened, and Hermione came running into the kitchen. "Mum? What happened? Why are you calling Harry?" A short pause, and then, "Can we turn on the lights?"

Helen clicked the lights on and replied a little shakily, "We have a major problem on our hands, dear, and it's going to need a family meeting, if we can keep Harry from doing something rash." Doug

came tearing into the kitchen in time to hear his wife's reply to their daughter.

"What happened, Helen? I heard a slam in Harry's room, and then you calling."

"I was out here in the kitchen, enjoying the night, as I do sometimes. I was against the counter when someone who I thought was you started caressing my back, teasing little patterns in it ... Hermione?"

Hermione had gone white. "How far did Harry go?"

Helen nodded at her daughter. "He was almost as good at knocking my socks off as your father." She looked at her own husband. "Doug?"

Doug blinked. "My god – given his history with the Dursleys? It was bad enough when I played that stupid joke on him ..." He suddenly bolted down the same hallway that Harry had. "Harry!" he yelled through the door. "Don't do anything rash!" Helen came up to the door as he listened through it. "Nothing."

Hermione came back from her room with her wand. "He's not there. We might need this." Her father tried the lock, and found the door locked. He rattled it, for whatever reason people do, as Hermione aimed the wand at the door. "*Alohomora!*" The door stubbornly refused to budge. Doug stepped back and kicked the door as hard as he could. It refused to budge still, and Doug was now favouring his other leg.

Hermione quickly cast a healing spell on her father's leg, and then looked at the door. "Sorry, but we have to." Helen didn't hear what she said, but the door simply ... vanished. Helen followed her child into the room, to find a parchment on the desk. Helen picked it up as her daughter repeated the performance with the bathroom door. Before she could read it, she heard Hermione shriek, "Harry! No!"

Helen ran into the room carrying the parchment and shrieked herself as she saw the tub that the young man was lying in – the water was

brilliant red, and Hermione was finishing the job of healing the long deep cuts on his arms. His eyes were open, and he wasn't unconscious, but neither could it be said that he was conscious either. "Hermione! Fireplace. Dumbledore. Now!"

She heard murmuring a moment later as her daughter ran from the room. She held Harry's head above the water, holding him loosely to her breast, refusing to let tears fall until this situation was under control. Less than five minutes later Albus Dumbledore came literally skidding into the room, Doug steadying him before he could fall. "What has happened?"

"Let's get him to the hospital first," Helen said. "He was smart enough to cut down the length of his arm, rather than across his wrists, damn it to hell! There's been serious blood loss, and ... oh hell, there's no way we can keep this out of the papers!" Helen felt tears coming from her eyes.

"Yes we can," Albus said. "I've already contacted Poppy – sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Granger – that refers to the Hogwarts nurse. She is a fully registered Healer, and she understands the need for secrecy. She is luckily at Hogwarts on one of her weekly visits to ensure that everything will be ready for the return of the students. I have asked that the fireplace in the ward be opened to Floo traffic for a time – we will close it later." He created a stretcher and loaded Harry onto it, and in short order was stepping through green flames to the Hogwarts hospital wing.

By the time the three of them joined Dumbledore in the Hogwarts infirmary, Harry was already in a bed, covered by a sheet. An obviously still tired Madame Pomfrey was kneeling next to Harry, and cast a spell on him, which seemed to wake him up slightly. "Drink this," she ordered, and without thinking, Harry did. After it was finished, she gently sent him back to sleep, and then turned to face the Grangers. Her eyes widened slightly, and levitated three robes to them. "Now, what happened to make the boy lose this much blood?"

Helen looked down at the parchment still in her hand. She lifted it.

#####

Forgive me.

I just destroyed the trust of everyone worth anything in this house – my wife and her parents. After this, I don't deserve to live.

Doug – she didn't know, and neither of us spoke. The first words spoken were a thank you to you after I ...

Helen – I don't deserve your forgiveness. My apology is as meaningless as I am.

Hermione – I ... I can't. There's no excuse. The violations this morning are beyond number – one of trust each for you, your mum, and your dad. The physical one of your mother. The violation of our marriage. The violation and probable dissolution of your parents' marriage. The list goes on. Please find the most vile method you can to dispose of my remains – I deserve it.

Goodbye. I won't be able to destroy anyone else anymore.

Harry

#####

It would be kind to call it a scrawl. It was hard to read, since it had obviously been written as fast as he could manage. She looked up at Doug. "Doug? You know what happened. What is your reaction – what will you do when Harry comes back to us?"

Doug looked at her. "It's a serious shock, but he made you happy, right? I think you said he blew your socks off almost as well as I do?" She nodded. "Are you going to leave me for him?"

"Hell no!" she cried out.

"I knew that, but the question had to be asked. Most important question can be asked when the four of us are together again."

Helen looked to her daughter, who had sat down beside Harry and was holding his hand. "You know what happened as well. Do you still love him?"

She looked up with tears in her eyes. "Always and forever. That's what I promised him, and that's what I'm giving him." She opened her robe slightly and put his hand on her chest, between her breasts. "Feel that, Harry? It still beats for you. I still love you."

Madame Pomfrey was tapping her foot. "Care explain it to those of us who will be treating him?"

Helen looked to Dumbledore. "Does she know about the handfasting?" At the nods of the two Hogwarts staff, she began. "Well, I was in the kitchen watching the stars when someone I thought was my husband came in and gave me a rather erotic massage. Let's just say that my son-in-law mistook me for my daughter in the extremely low light conditions, and gave me a rather impressive internal massage, if you understand my meaning. When I called him by my husband's name, he realised what he'd done, and ran for his room. As his note says, he tried to kill himself because he thinks he's destroyed three lives."

"Four, Mum. Don't forget that he thinks he's lost ... me," Hermione's eyes widened as she spoke. "He thinks he lost everything, and destroyed himself. So he decided to do so physically."

Madame Pomfrey's face was a study in conflicting emotions, and she looked as if she needed her own services. Finally, she looked at Hermione. "You learn such interesting things about the students sometimes."

"Don't you just?" Helen asked with a wry smile. "One of your patients just got handfasted to a practicing naturist, and is learning it himself."

"I think I learned it too well," Harry said from the bed, surprising everyone.

"How ... I gave you a sleeping draught – how are you awake right now?" Madame Pomfrey said, stumbling over her words.

"I don't know," Harry said numbly. "I just woke up. I was hoping not to, after that." He closed his eyes again. "Shortest marriage in wizarding history, I'd imagine. Get married in the evening on my birthday, and before the marriage is more than a week old, I go and

... oh hell." He looked up at Doug and Helen, who were looking at him with worry in their eyes. "I'm sorry – more sorry than I will ever be able to put into words. If I'd only been willing to allow speech, this never would have happened."

"Why are you beating yourself up over this?" Doug asked. "As odd as it's going to sound, given the circumstances, it's an honest mistake."

Harry's look told Helen that right now, Harry considered her husband full blown barking mad. "Excuse me? I walk into the kitchen and violated your wife? An honest mistake?"

Helen chose to speak up. "We've talked about this already, Harry. And speaking as the violated one, I can tell you that first off, until you reacted, I thought that you were Doug, so I didn't feel violated, and still don't. Second, we'll be having a family meeting about this, but I can already tell you that under *extremely specific*, and I do mean extremely specific circumstances to be talked about later, I wouldn't complain about being violated like that again." She walked forward, leaned over and kissed Harry's cheek. "Thank you. It does this old lady's heart good to know she can be mistaken for her sixteen year old daughter in *all* the ways that count."

#####

Harry looked stunned at Helen, and then looked to Hermione. It was then that he realized that his arm was at an odd angle, since she hadn't let go of his hand. He could feel her heartbeat under his palm. "It still beats for you, Harry." She grinned at him. "You apparently blew Mum's socks off."

"She wasn't wearing any," he said blankly.

"Not after that, I wasn't!" Helen laughed, and her husband and daughter joined in.

Harry couldn't stop it; he felt the tears coming, and tried ruthlessly to quash them, even by shoving a knuckle into his eye. They came anyway. "Why can't you understand?! I deserve to be punished for what I did today! Because I acted without thinking this morning, I broke my wedding vows to Hermione!"

"Harry, you thought, given the light level, that my mother was me. You already heard her thank you for the compliment. We need a family meeting about this at some point, but I'm not going to leave you over this."

"You should. Once again, Wonder Boy does something without thinking, and lives get destroyed." He barked a laugh, one of the unhappiest sounds he'd ever released. "I don't know which is worse, being directly the cause for someone's death, or directly the cause for the destruction of trust, and possibly marriages."

Hermione looked at him for a long moment before speaking. "Harry, I know what you said, and we are going to punish you. We'll punish you in what you'll consider the worst way possible." He looked at her. "We're going to keep loving you as we always have. You're still my husband, and they still are happy to have you as a son-in-law." He looked to them, and they nodded. "And I'll expect you to do to me what you did to her," she whispered in his ear. "I want you still, Harry. If Dumbledore and Pomfrey weren't here, I'd be making an effort to prove that to you."

Her face looked pained suddenly. "Please don't ever do that to me again, Harry. There is no problem so bad that we can't at least try to work it out. We might not be so lucky next time." She hugged him. "To find your husband lying in a bathtub, turning the water red with his blood" She shivered. "Harry, I told you so many times our wedding night. I. Love. You. Get that through your apparently thick skull. Know that I won't leave you for this." She smiled sadly. "We're going to keep loving you."

"Even when I don't deserve it?" he asked, somehow sounding both small and insignificant, and yet defiant at the same time.

"That hasn't happened yet, Harry, so we'll worry about that when it comes, won't we?" she said with a note of finality in her voice. He could see that she was serious. She actually didn't see what he'd done as wrong.

None of them do. Does that mean that it's my problem, or that they can't see something that I think is blindingly obvious? He scowled. Hermione's right, though – next time we might be this lucky,

and quite honestly, my life isn't my own at the moment. Voldemort has to go first. "Why?" he asked suddenly.

"Because we love you, and because our views on sex are what most people consider perverse," Doug said. "Harry, what happened was unusual, and unlikely in the extreme. I think that anyone not privy to the conditions in the house would say that you had to know what you were doing. Your reaction after finding out tells *me* otherwise." He walked to the other side of the bed. "I don't ever want to go through this again, Harry, but the fact that you felt so horrible over what you thought you had done tells me everything I'll ever need to know about you, and what you were feeling. As far as you knew, in that light, you were making love to my daughter." He grinned and looked at Hermione. "Who, somehow, despite all that's happened since you came into our lives permanently this year, is still a virgin. It's a dad's prerogative to carry that delusion," he laughed.

"It's another reason I feel so out of place here, Harry," Hermione said. "The attitudes in the wizarding world are a result of the extreme life-spans. The headmaster here is what, one hundred and fifty something ..."

"Almost one hundred and sixty," Dumbledore interjected.

"... exactly," Hermione nodded. "Almost one-hundred and sixty years old. One of your proctors for your O.W.L.s was someone who had tested *him* for his O.W.L.s! And no one thinks twice about it! That puts the thought processes somewhere in the mid to late nineteenth century, assuming that social mores mirror the Muggle era in question. Unless I misread something ..." she paused while Harry snorted, "... thank you. Figure the Victorian Era."

"Charming woman," Dumbledore said. "Horrible problems, but a charming woman if she chose to be."

"So, into this society of Victorian sensibilities comes a ... a Mudblood – I used the term on purpose Harry, so stop scowling – whose attitudes are even a bit far out there for Muggles, which is how she was raised until she was almost eleven. A girl who would be perfectly comfortable sitting in her classes dressed in nothing but a warming charm"

"None of the guys would be comfortable," Harry murmured. "Not with that figure you've got."

"Thank you, Harry." She looked up at Dumbledore. "Will we be getting our own quarters at some point? Oh, and another question came to mind – are we going to announce that we're already handfasted, or will we allow everyone to assume that this September wedding is the first one?"

"I believe that is up to you," came the headmaster's reply.

"We might be able to set a trap for Voldemort if we let him assume that it's the first one. Come up with some story – hell, even use the real one – the Dursleys broke his protections by abusing him, and he'll garner some new protections by marrying the most beautiful woman at Hogwarts. He'll settle for me, though," she finished with a grin.

"Yeah, the most beautiful woman at Hogwarts. I see your point, though. Set you up to be kidnapped by Moldieshorts before the wedding. What he doesn't know is that we're set up for him." Harry scowled. "There's one part of that scenario that really bothers me, Hermione, and that's where you get put in danger because you're going to marry me." He held out his arms so that his palms were up, exposing the area that he'd sliced open shortly before. "You saw what happened when I thought I'd lost you through my own stupidity. Imagine if you get killed at Voldemort's hands, because you intentionally put yourself in harm's way. I'd much rather live to twice the headmaster's current age, getting to know my great-great-great-great-grandchildren than to commit suicide taking Moldie out. If you die, I will have no reason to live, Hermione. You keep me sane; you make me whole; you keep me alive. It's not hipe ... hyper ... oh hell, overstating the case to say that I will die without you, Hermione. I think I proved that today, without meaning to." He scowled. "I still think I deserve it, to some extent, for this morning."

"Hyperbole," came Hermione's blank reply as tears sprang to her eyes. "I didn't understand why you'd done that, but now I do. You thought that I'd hate you, and demand to never see you again, didn't

you?" He nodded. "Aren't you glad that we're considered weird, as Muggles go?" She paused. "'Moldieshorts'?"

"Gotta call him something, and if people can know who I'm talking about, and laugh about him, it stops making him quite so scary, and easier to fight, right? Since everyone does this He Who Must Not Be Named garbage ... you've seen how Ron flinches very time I use the name Voldemort." Madame Pomfrey twitched. "She proves my point. Call him Moldieshorts, or something equally as ridiculous, and you take away some of his power, don't you?"

"Excellent reasoning, Harry," Albus Dumbledore said with a wide smile. "I believe that I shall start using that name in conversations, with your permission, of course?"

Harry laughed. "Go ahead!" He turned serious again quickly, though. "As for what happened this morning, it will never happen again, though."

"That's something we'll talk about later, Harry," Doug said firmly. "Suffice it to say that you should learn a lesson from Sean Connery." At Harry's puzzled look, he added, "'Never Say Never Again.' Movie title came about because Connery said he'd never play James Bond again. They convinced him otherwise. What I'm trying to say is that you shouldn't make a sweeping statement before all the facts are in, okay? We'll talk at the family meeting." Harry nodded numbly.

Harry looked at his professor, and felt small. "Sir, I haven't been a very good student this last year or so – hell, I can't say that I was all that good a person, and now this happens. Do you have any respect left for me, if you ever had any?"

"Harry, my boy, I respect you a great deal more than you think, and am sorry that I have done things to lose *your* respect. I hope to regain some of it by treating you as you deserve. One of those things is to inform you that there will be an Order meeting on Friday, and it will be somewhat necessary that you come. After all, a very important and intelligent young man told me that the Order's stated goal was to support you in the battle against Vol ... Moldieshorts." The aged wizard's face split with a wide grin. "That does feel good to say, I

must admit. As I was saying, however, if our goal is to support you, then you should be a full member. I will also request the presence of your wife and her parents, as well as Ronald Weasley. After all, you are likely to tell at least Ronald and your wife about what you learn, since they are your closest confidants." He turned to the Grangers. "And you, whether you like it or not, have been thrust into the midst of a battle that you might have wished to avoid. But as you said, this is war, and sides must be chosen, once you know it exists."

"I just wish there was a way of giving them the ability to do magic themselves, sir," Harry said. "That would give them further ability to fight Moldie, and well, it would help them understand their daughter a bit better."

Dumbledore scowled in thought. "There might be, but it would likely be quite dangerous. Not to them, per se, but to those involved with the process. Let me study the problem, and I shall update you Friday. In the meantime, we shall return you home. Harry, I will be having a wizard psychologist that I trust with my own secrets contact you so that you may work through this day's events. One does not attempt suicide and then simply walk away as if nothing happened."

Harry nodded. "It was stupid of me, I know."

"No, Harry, it was not. But suicide is, as I once heard someone say, a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Ignoring Moldieshorts for now, you are far too valuable as yourself to throw that away. Not as The Boy Who Lived, or the prophesied one to fight Tom, or anything else dealing with that line of thinking. Harry Potter, nothing more than the student of Hogwarts, husband to a wonderful woman, and son by marriage to two very intriguing people – that young man is far too valuable to let be lost. Valuable for himself; not for what he can do."

"Thank you, sir. I'll try to be worthy of your belief in me."

"You already are, Harry," the old wizard said. "You already are."

Chapter 12

It had been a week since Harry's attempted suicide, and Hermione was trying to revivify her love life with Harry. He would cuddle with her, but even though he was obviously quite interested in more, he refused to let it happen. She was currently laying on her back in the back yard again, thinking about the conversation she'd just had with Harry. He was currently talking with her mother.

"Hermione, I'm sorry, I can't," he said. "I'm not worthy of something so precious anymore."

"Harry, we all told you that we forgive you. Dad was right. It was unusual and extremely unlikely, but it happened, and the fact that you ... you ..." She shuddered as she remembered finding Harry semi-conscious in the bath tub, his blood darkening the water. "Your trying to kill yourself afterwards tells us all that you never meant it to happen."

He shuddered. "My problem is that, in my own mind, I cheated on you. Would you accept it if I'd slept with – oh, let's pick a name – Cho Chang, even if I were drunk at the time? If the note had said that I'd slept with Cho Chang while drunk, would you be as forgiving?"

She looked at him for a long moment. "Okay, fair question. Now let me make it more on an equal footing, and I'll answer the question. You're drunk, as opposed to tired. You're horny, which has recently been a normal state for you." She smiled as she said it. "You're blindfolded, and asked to wait in a room for me, where I'm going to be brought to screw your brains out. Being blindfolded, you enjoy it when something hot and wet surrounds your cock, and you both orgasm. Only after she finally speaks do you discover that you just fucked Cho Chang." She crossed her arms. "I wouldn't be happy, just as I can't say that I was utterly thrilled that Mom knows how good you are. But given a situation where you don't know until after, such as a week ago? Yes, Harry, I will still love you. I've told you this since the moment you woke up in the hospital ward at Hogwarts. I still love you. I will continue to love you. And I fully

intend to bear multiple children of yours someday, Harry James Potter, so be ready for that."

He laughed a bitter laugh. "The only things I've done right in this life so far had to do with you. Saving your life – well, that was Ron, really – was one of them. Telling you I love you was another, and agreeing to marry you. Any decision that's purely my own? Forget it. Cedric dies. Siruis dies because I can't tell the difference between fact and fiction, and go haring off, dragging him somewhere dangerous, where he gets himself killed. And because I couldn't control an itch that I thought needed scratching, your mother now has knowledge that I think no one in this house is really happy that she has." He sighed deeply. "And no matter what you say, I can't help but feel that I've let you all down."

"Harry, you haven't let me down. And to be honest with you, if that had to happen, then you did it with the woman I feel best about it happening with. She treated you well, you treated her well, and she's not going to try to steal you." She paused. "Harry, last I knew, Mum was in the family room. If she's still there, go talk to her. She was always able to help me sleep at night, when I needed it most. Let her be the mother you've never had, and let her try to help you."

"Okay," he said, unconvinced. "Where will you be?"

"I'll be out in the back, near the pool, star-gazing."

She heard the sliding door open, and then the lights to the pool clicked on. She sat up to see Harry looking at her, and he dove quickly into the pool. *Hmm, was he ... maybe I'd better climb in the pool and find out* She dove into the pool herself, and guided herself toward Harry underwater. She opened her eyes as she neared him, and found that she had certainly been right. Slowing to almost a stop she gently slid up his body, feeling his erection quiver as they touched. Breaking the surface of the water, she said, "Hello, love. Feeling better?"

"A bit. She's helped me see that I'm punishing you by trying to punish myself." His eyes suddenly held his entire heart in them. "Even after that, you truly still love me?"

Her answer was not verbal. Instead, she pressed her lips to his and kissed him. Almost immediately her tongue brushed his lower lip, entreating him to let her inside, which he did. The kiss was hungry and passionate, and she knew that her heart was pounding so hard that he could feel it. She smiled to herself and wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him as tightly to her as she could. "Harry?" she whispered. "Please love me again."

"I've always loved you, Hermione. I just never admitted it until recently."

"No, *love* me. Physically." She nibbled gently on his ear and whispered again, "Fuck me, Harry. I want you." When he paused, she added, "Please, my love?"

He responded by kissing her again and grabbing her buttocks. He lifted her enough to free his organ from between the two of them, and she reached down to guide him inside her. The contended sound she made as he began to stretch her so deliciously was somewhere between a sigh and a moan. "Oh gods yes, Harry!" she whispered in his ear as she grabbed his neck. "Make me yours again."

He began to gently thrust again, and as she looked in his eyes, she let all the love she still felt for him shine out. His own eyes widened, and she could see the hint of tears there. She lost track of time as they simply enjoyed each other's body, expressing their feelings in the ultimate physical fashion. Finally, on her second or third orgasm (she wasn't sure, and she really didn't care – as long as it was more than one), she felt him swell slightly, and then he came, pressing into her as tightly as he could.

When she was able to focus, she saw Harry staring lovingly into her eyes. The haunted feeling from the last week was still there, but she could tell that he felt ... *cleansed is really the only word that fits here, I think*, she finished in her thoughts. "Hermione?" he asked. "When was the last time that I told you that I love you with everything I am?"

She chuckled as she said, "About a minute ago, Harry. You fuck marvellously."

"That's not what I meant, Hermione," he started to say.

"I know what you meant, Harry. I was looking in your eyes. Anybody can take a man or a woman between their legs and have a nice pleasurable bout of sex. You made love to me, Harry. You didn't merely have sex, or fuck – you *made love* to me." She hugged him even tighter. "You loved me a minute or so ago, Harry – it just happened to cause an orgasm." She kissed him passionately on the mouth, and giggled into his mouth as she felt him stiffening in her again. "We have a week to make up for, Harry. Care to start now?"

The next morning, Harry awoke to the feeling of weight on his right arm. He turned to face Hermione, and suddenly realized that not only were they still outdoors, but the beach umbrella was open above them, blocking the sun. They also had a light-weight blanket covering them. He smiled and kissed Hermione's cheek.

She opened her eyes slowly, and smiled when she saw Harry's face. "Good morning, Mr. Happy," she said with a yawn.

"Oh, he's awake too," Harry laughed, and pressed closer to her. Her eyes widened.

"I was only joking about making up for that week, Harry! Not that I'm complaining, but we have to go into Diagon Alley sometime soon, and I want to walk straight." She looked at him for a moment, and before his face could fall, she said, "Oh, the hell with it. I'm yours, Mister Potter." She slid under the blanket, and soon he felt her mouth surround him, and he pulled her close enough to do what they had taken to calling French kissing. He felt her moan as he teased her mercilessly, and in short order, they had properly woken each other.

"I don't suppose you two would be interested in a second breakfast?" Helen asked with a naughty grin on her face. "You certainly seemed to be interested in getting your fill a short time ago."

Blushing, Harry said, "Thank you, Mum. For the talk – for everything. I'm still going to be working it through, but you convinced me that all I was doing my way was hurting my wife."

"Well, the four boys from Liverpool said it all those years ago, but it's true. All you need is love. With our love supporting you, you'll get through this, Harry. We all will." She turned to Hermione. "I think what you've been waiting for has arrived, dear. Very late, and I think they'll want your response as for classes you'll take back as fast as possible."

Hermione ran to the family room table, where two letters sat. Opening hers, she found her O.W.L. results, a listing of classes available for sixth years, a blank sheet of parchment and a letter of explanation from Minerva McGonagall, telling them (since Harry's said the same, once he'd opened his letter) that the extreme lateness was due to arguments concerning the grading of the Astronomy examinations. They were expected to fill in their preferred class lists as soon as possible and return them to the school. She looked to her O.W.L. results.

Ordinary Wizarding Levels for Hermione J. Granger

<i>Overall</i>	<i>Written</i>	<i>Practical</i>	<i>O</i>
<i>Ancient Runes</i>	E	N/A	E
<i>Arithmancy</i>	O	O	O
<i>Astronomy</i>	A*	A*	A*
<i>Care of Magical Creatures</i>	O	O	O
<i>Charms</i>	O	O	O

<i>Defense Arts</i>	<i>Against</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>Dark</i>
O	O	O	
<i>Divination</i>		N/A	N/A
A			N/
<i>Herbology</i>		O	O
O			
<i>History of Magic</i>		O	N/A
			O
<i>Muggle Studies</i>		O	O
			O
<i>Potions</i>		O	O
			O
<i>Transfigurations</i>		O	O
			O
		Total	1
1			

* Due to an incident during the examination, all results were set to Acceptable. A retest will be available to all who wish to attempt to better this result.

“Rats!” Harry said. “I was hoping you’d get twelve.”

“I saw no reason to take the Divination O.W.L., since I think that Trelawney is such a fraud. I decided to spend my time on worthwhile pursuits, like doing well on all my other classes. I’m still annoyed about that Runes grade though. Astronomy I’ll take again, since they’re offering.”

“I will too,” Harry said with a laugh. “You worked so hard to help me study that it doesn’t seem right to let a simple Acceptable go. I’ll bet you a hundred Galleons, though, that Ron lets his stand.”

“Sucker bet,” she laughed in reply. “Not taking it. So, how’d you do?”

“Well, I know I got at least one O.W.L.,” he chuckled.

Ordinary Wizarding Levels for Harry J. Potter

<i>Overall</i>	<i>Written</i>	<i>Practical</i>	<i>O</i>
<i>Ancient Runes</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Arithmancy</i>		N/A	N/A
<i>Astronomy</i>		A*	A*
<i>Care of Magical Creatures</i>	E	E	E
<i>Charms</i>		E	E
<i>Defense Against the Dark Arts</i>	O	O***	O
<i>Divination</i>	A	A	A
<i>Herbology</i>		E	E
<i>History of Magic</i>	D**	N/A	D**
<i>Muggle Studies</i>	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Potions</i>	O	O	O
<i>Transfigurations</i>	E	O	E
		Total	8

* Due to an incident during the examination, all results were set to Acceptable. A retest will be available to all who wish to attempt to better this result.

** A retest will be offered, since there has never before been a student attacked during an exam.

*** The proctor stated that if there were a grade above Outstanding, this student would have been granted such a grade.

"Before you ask – yes, I'm retaking History of Magic. You think I want a Dreadful on my grade record?" He smiled at her.

"Hmm, I am rubbing off on you," she smiled back. He leered at her with a twinkle in his eyes. "Harry!" Smiling demurely, she said, "At least give a girl some recovery time."

"Okay," he said. Looking down at a non-existent wristwatch, he said, "How about now?"

She playfully swatted his arm, and sat down to her list of classes. "Snape's going to hate that. You managed to get an Outstanding in Potions? You can take his N.E.W.T. level class now. That's one of them you need for Auror training, right?"

He scowled. "Yeah, but I'm not so sure about doing that anymore. Yeah, it would be nice to track down and catch the bad guys, but ... I don't think I'm really cut out for that, you know? Maybe I should talk to Professor McGonagall?" He looked up to the clock and realized that it was nine AM. "Maybe I can ask her here for some career counselling?"

"Get dressed first," Helen said. Harry jumped from startlement and headed for the room he now shared with Hermione. "May need to put a sign up in your room, when Hogwarts gives you married quarters. 'Did you remember to dress?' He may need it, or else the other girls in your dormitory are going to get quite the eyeful."

"Agreed," Hermione said. "He is great eye candy, though, isn't he?"

"No denying that, dear. Go get dressed yourself, and then you can call this teacher while Doug and I get ourselves ready."

A short time later they were sitting in the family room with coffee and crumb cake while Harry explained the situation to the deputy headmistress. “The Department of Mysteries scenario really brought home to me the other side of being an Auror, and what I learned afterwards hit even harder.” He told her the prophecy, knowing that she was in the Order. “I’m not a killer. I don’t want to kill anyone, but I know of at least one murder I have to perform, even if it will be considered an execution, or self defence, or whatever. But it comes down to not wanting to kill. And the Auror job is one where I’d have to, on a regular basis, be prepared to kill. Saving the world from bad guys sounds good, but I’m learning the dark underbelly of the job, and I don’t like it. I think it would turn me into someone that wasn’t worthy of this wonderful family. It would turn me into someone that Sirius wouldn’t like.” Mentioning his godfather’s name brought memories back to him, and he bit back a sob. “Sorry. I’ve never had a chance to really grieve for him.” He shook his head and continued slowly, pushing his grief behind him. “What I was saying was that if I become an Auror, I might become the kind of person that would disappoint my parents. I don’t want that. But what else do I do with my life? Become a Quidditch player? Yeah, I could, but what’s that really going to get me in life? What do I do with my life?”

Minerva McGonagall looked at Harry and Hermione for a long moment before saying, “Have either of you contemplated teaching? You did quite well teaching your fellow students – at least those who chose to be part of that ‘illegal’ club were well prepared. Because of you, we *did* have a real Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. It was you. Perhaps you should contemplate a teaching career, Harry.”

He thought for a moment, and then nodded. “Which courses would you suggest for me, then?”

She frowned for a moment. “I would recommend no more than six this year. That goes for you as well, Mrs. Potter. You are used to taking as many classes as you can, but you have other, far more important studies to deal with this year. Real world studies. You are now handfasted, and on the nineteenth of next month, any authority

that could have a problem will see you as married. Keeping your partner satisfied is a far more strenuous study course that will take the rest of your life." As both Hermione's and Harry's eyes twinkled, she added, "As for that side of the equation, I imagine that you've quite got that figured out, if the night of your handfasting was any indicator." She was rewarded with a blush from them both. "No, I refer to all the other things that make a couple happy. Leaving the toilet seat down. Knowing what annoys the other, and avoiding it whenever possible. Saying 'I love you' for no other reason than the fact that you love them."

Harry looked at Hermione, and Minerva McGonagall could see what people meant when they referred to these two communicating without words. She could almost read it herself. She definitely read the 'I love you' that passed between the two, but missed most everything else.

"Okay," Harry said. "I'll take six this year, and take six next year. I'll have the most brilliant witch in Hogwarts tutor me in Arithmancy during this year so that I can properly take it in seventh year." He absently waved for his quill and inkpot, and both his and Hermione's floated out. He quickly marked down Potions, Charms, Transfigurations and Defense Against the Dark Arts before stopping to think.

"I would actually recommend avoiding Muggle Studies and History of Magic, if you are considering teaching, Harry," Minerva suggested. Smiling, she added, "I know that seems scandalous coming from me, but they will serve you the least. I would recommend Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, and I can talk to the teachers of those classes. I think Amanda Vector will accept you as a student." He nodded and marked those two down on his course load and handed her the sheet. "Thank you." As Hermione handed her the sheet she had just filled out, Minerva smiled. "Have a care to pay attention to classes, please. It appears that you are taking the same course load." She stood slowly. "I hate to eat and run, but we are reaching the end of our summer, and to get the school year going in full swing will require much more paperwork. I fear that I must leave you now. Be sure to get your books soon." She pointed at the blank sheets, which were no longer blank.

Before she could leave, she was stopped by Hermione. "Professor? Harry and I came to a decision about letting people know. As far as Hogwarts is concerned, we're only engaged. We're doing it to get him free of his abusive aunt and uncle. The fact that I happen to love him madly, passionately and with every single fibre of my being is just icing on the cake, so to speak." Minerva looked to Harry, who nodded.

"Very well. I shall inform Professor Dumbledore." She smiled. "You realize, of course, that you will each have to spend eighteen days sleeping in your old dormitory rooms, then?"

They looked at each other, and Harry quipped, "Well, it looks like I'm sleeping on the common room couch for eighteen days." Hermione nodded as she added, "Me too." When Minerva raised an eyebrow to the two of them, Harry replied, "I can't sleep without her anymore, ma'am. I have much more restful and peaceful nights when I can hold her in my arms. So, I'll sleep in the common room for a while."

Minerva laughed. "I'll see what we can manage." Her gaze unfocused for a moment, and then a wide grin crossed her face for a moment. "Yes, I think that will work perfectly, and I will not be surprised to discover that Albus has already planned for it." She refocused and said, "You shall learn what I'm thinking about if it comes to pass." She tossed a handful of Floo powder into the fireplace and disappeared.

As she disappeared, Harry said, "You surprised me with that last, but I support the reasoning. I don't mind, as long as the 'madly, passionately' part is mentioned." He laughed at the last. "Do we at least admit that we're engaged when we go to Diagon Alley?"

"Hell, yes!" she exclaimed. "You think I don't want to show off this ring? That I bagged the sexiest and most wonderful man in the Wizarding world?" She grinned. "You tie with Dad on wonderful as far as the Muggle world is concerned." She looked to her father. "Sorry Dad, but you're not even a contestant as far as sexiest is concerned. That sort of thinking is a bit squicky, you know?"

Doug chuckled and walked over to the phone, and put it on speaker as the other end rang. A few moments later they heard a female voice asking, "Hello? Weasley residence."

"This is Douglas Granger. Is this Miss Ginny Weasley?"

"Yes, it is," she said, and they could hear her smile. "Should I get Mum for you?"

"Not necessarily. Have you made your trip to Diagon Alley yet?"

"Not yet. We were going to go this weekend, now that Ron got his O.W.L. results. Mom is so pleased – he got nine!"

"Tell him congratulations from all of us. How does the group of us meeting at the Leaky Cauldron sound? Maybe about noon?"

"I'll mention it to Mum. Might as well assume that we're on for it if you don't hear back from us."

"Ginny!" Hermione said quickly. "Pass word to everyone who was at the handfasting that we're pretending to be engaged, rather than already married. We're doing it to rescue him from the Dursleys, and the fact that he's mind-numbingly wonderful and sexy is an added bonus for me," she ended with a laugh.

"Gotcha, Hermione. One of these days I'm going to get revenge on you, by the way. I'm not sure how or when, but I will."

"Whatever for?" came Hermione's too-innocent reply.

"You know darn well what for, girl!" Ginny laughed. "We'll see you on the weekend, okay?" At the affirmative from the Grangers, the connection was ended.

Chapter 13

The Grangers and the Potters (as Hermione insisted on being referred to as Mrs. Potter, at least amongst those in the know) sat in the Leaky Cauldron waiting for the Weasleys to show up. Harry sat contemplating the information he had gotten just the day before, from the representative for the Crown.

"Well, Mister Potter, it appears that your testimony on the first day of the trial was the most important thing. Evidence helped, but it was you who put Vernon Dursley in prison for a number of years," the Crown's solicitor had said. "Not only that, but he has been ordered to pay back to you the sum of money that was given them, starting from January of 1982 until the end of June of this year. Considering that they were getting an extra five hundred pounds sterling per month, I think the sudden outflow of eighty seven thousand pounds from their funds should put something of a crimp in their style."

Harry's face had fallen. "Never happen. They don't have that much."

"Then they shall be forced to sell until they have achieved the goal. If she is smart, Petunia Dursley will sell the house at Number four Privet Drive and use what is left of the funds to set herself up somewhere."

"The rest of the funds? How much is that house worth?" he'd asked in some shock.

"Current prices run to somewhere roughly around two hundred thousand pounds. That is, of course, a very rough estimate, but I will be quite surprised to see it go for significantly lower than that."

Harry had snorted. "I checked some of the finances of my 'unemployed' father. Perhaps I should buy the house from them, for eighty-seven thousand pounds less than the asking price, and turn it into a rental property. Give me a constant income."

The solicitor had blinked, but smiled. "I see that you have been giving some thought to being on your own. You certainly seem to be as mature as I was told."

"I was forced to learn at an early age," he'd responded. "I have no doubt that their treatment of me will cause quite a bit of expensive therapy at some point. It would have been nice to have had a childhood – a real one." He shrugged. "Maybe I can have one when I hit my middle age crisis. Combine the two for efficiency's sake." He smiled at the small joke.

"What are you thinking about, Harry?" Helen asked. "You were completely elsewhere."

"Just remembering the solicitor, yesterday. I said it as a joke, but that just might be an idea. Buying the house from them for a fair price, minus the eighty-seven thousand they owe me by Court mandate, and turning it into a rental property." He scowled. "Then again, with the way Aunt Petunia was looking at me on my birthday, she might burn the place down rather than sell to me." He sighed. "I pity my Mum, in a way. To have grown up in a household with such a disgusting and vile thing as Petunia."

"Harry ..." Hermione began.

"No. She's hated me forever. She's the one who hit me with a frying pan more than once. When Hagrid came to collect me, she ranted about Mum. The whole problem she had was that she was fu ... she was jealous! 'Lily was always the special one!'" he repeated, mocking Petunia's voice. "I don't know for certain, but I seriously doubt that I even could shed a tear if I were to hear that any of the three of them died in horrific circumstances." He paused. "Hmm, Moldie is likely to go after them now that I'm not there anymore. At least, once it's discovered that you and I are marrying because they broke the protections on me." Sighing, he said, "I'll tell the Weasley's and let them pass it along to Dumbledore. He'll know who to contact – he's got some contacts in the Ministry. I personally don't care."

"Harry, you don't mean that," Hermione began.

"Oh yes, I do!" he answered hotly. "They spent the entire time I lived with them making sure that I knew that I was unloved, unwanted, and generally hated. Things were done in front of me to let me know how they treated people they loved – at least whatever their perverted version of it was. Petunia Evans Dursley is a worthless piece of Muggle trash, just like her son."

Hermione looked at him and said, a bit coldly, "My parents are Muggles, in case you've forgotten."

"No, I haven't forgotten. You also understand what I mean, as well. Muggle trash gets thrown out on the curbside. Wizarding trash is treated better than I was, or than they deserve, if only because it might explode or something if not handled properly. I'm saying that Petunia and Dudley are worthless, and always will be, and that any tears when they die will be faked for the newspapers. They're garbage, and Voldemort can have them, for all I care." He crossed his arms in front of his chest, ignoring Hermione's glare.

The fireplace flared, and one by one the Weasley family spun to a stop. They hurried over to the table, and hugs were shared all around. It was quite obvious that the Potters were not speaking at the moment. Harry looked at Hermione for a moment, his face fell, and he said quietly, "Shall we head into Diagon Alley? I think we all need to stop at Gringott's first." Without waiting for an answer, he stood and headed out the door for the brick wall, which he tapped listlessly.

As they walked down the street, Harry heading the procession, Ron caught up to him and tugged his shoulder. "What's up, chum? You look like you've lost your best friend."

"One of them, at least," Harry replied quietly. "Ron, do you have any idea why I can't do anything but Quidditch and Defence against the Dark Arts right? Why am I so worthless when it comes to interacting with other people?"

"Whoa – where'd this come from?"

"Sirius meant so much to me that it's tearing me apart still – but I couldn't be bothered to talk to him using those mirrors. Back in fourth

year, I hurt Parvati's feelings without even trying. Now I have so little human compassion that I anger Hermione when I admit that I won't mourn if Voldemort kills the Dursleys. Why ... why can't I have normal human feelings, instead of being this ... this uncaring thing that pays no mind to who gets hurt or killed around me?"

Ron blinked. "I think you're asking the wrong person here, Harry. I have the emotional depth of a teaspoon, remember?" he chuckled softly. "You want me to send Ginny or Mum up here to talk to? I really am out of my league on this, and I know you need to talk to someone."

"Nah, I'll work it through, like I always do. I won't be stupid enough to try what I did last time, though."

"What happened?"

"Never mind. I did something really stupid, and Dumbledore had to step into the picture on that one. That reminds me – I need to talk to the person he recommended I talk to." They had reached the doors to Gringott's and headed inside, where Harry immediately headed for the desk for some information.

Upon showing his key to the goblin, he was greeted with a toothy grin. "So, you are here for the paperwork, I suppose?" the goblin said.

"What paperwork?"

"Sirius Black's last will and testament stated that his possessions and funds were to be equally split between you and Remus Lupin. I am surprised that you had not been notified."

"Yeah, well, I've been a little difficult to locate this summer. Haven't really stayed in one place very long. What kind of monies are we talking about?"

The goblin looked at the paperwork and quoted a figure that ran to eight digits. "That's purely monetary, mind you, the value of the properties adds to that a bit."

"Um, I guess – toss me the paperwork, I'll sign it, and then we'll deal with the rest of my business, since this changes things slightly." He signed the forms and handed them back.

"Give us ten minutes, and the money will be transferred to your own vault, Mister Potter."

"Wait, before you do that, I need a couple things done. First, take half of that money and open a new vault for Hermione Granger, taking the fees for opening that vault from the half that is staying with me, as all upkeep fees should, as well. Next, after that money has been dealt with, I want another two hundred and fifty thousand Galleons taken from my money and placed in the Weasley vault." He paused. "Is there an easier way of reaching my money, rather than having to come back here all the time?"

"Yes, Mister Potter. We have a new money bag that is only reachable by the individual it is spelled for, that will release whatever amount of cash the individual states. Also, for those who occasionally deal in Muggle circles, such as yourself, we offer what the Muggles call a debit card. Do you know how those work?"

Harry nodded. "Okay, we'll need a pouch and card for Miss Granger, fees to come from my vault, and the same for myself." The goblin nodded, and jumped down from the desk, returning a moment later with a short stack of papers.

"These are your requests. Once you sign them, we will process them immediately. Miss Granger shall need to come over to claim her card and pouch and key, however."

Harry nodded and signed in several places, and then turned to the group waiting for him in the waiting area. "Hermione?" he said, motioning her over. When she got there, he nodded to the goblin. "He has some business for you to deal with, and then we can get to our shopping." He walked over to the group, leaving Hermione to deal with the goblin. "I want to get out of here soon, she's probably going to be angry with me for what I did, thinking I'm trying to bribe my way back into her good graces."

"What did you do?" Helen asked.

"Well, no one ever contacted me about Sirius's last will and testament. Turns out he split it between Remus and me. I took half of that cash and opened a vault for Hermione, as well as getting her a debit card and money pouch, all fees to come from my vault." He looked to the Weasleys. "I also had them transfer a little bit into your vault. If you don't want it, then give it to a charity or something, but I won't take it back."

"How much?" Molly asked warily.

"Don't worry," Harry responded with the closest thing to a smile that he could manage. "It was less than one percent of the money that I let stay in my vault."

"How much, Harry?" she asked, dangerously this time.

"Two hundred and fifty," he replied. She nodded, pleased that it wasn't very much. "Mind you, he finished, that number is measured in thousands." Her eyes nearly popped out of her head.

"Two hundred and fifty thousand Galleons? Are you crazy, Harry?" she gasped.

"Apparently," Hermione said from behind him. "Why, Harry?"

"Because they deserve it," he said. "So do you. You were more his friend this last two years than I was, and I got the money because I was the son of one of his best friends from school. So you deserve some of it. Since it was mine to do with what I wanted, after I signed the receipts, I chose to disb ... what's the word I'm looking for?"

"Disburse?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah. I disbursed it where I felt I should. I knew that if I gave more than one percent of what was staying in my vault, the Weasleys might not accept it. But since it is less than one percent, it's a drop in the frigging bucket." He scowled. "All I had to do was kill someone to get it."

"Harry ..." Helen started to say.

Ignoring her, Harry went on. "I've wanted to do this for you for a long time, Mrs. Weasley. Please accept it. I'm not hurting for money right now, and it's not likely that I will for a long time, if ever. You've been there for me when I needed it, and it's really the only way I can say thank you." He smiled sadly at her. "Go buy Ron and Ginny new stuff." He spun and looked at the group. "Well, let the Weasleys get their money for the day of shopping, and we'll go get what we need." He pulled Ron aside. "Please, Ron, know that I'm not trying to flaunt anything in front of you. Yeah, I've got this damn load of money. People had to die for me to get it, and I just wasn't worth it. Let me send it where I can. Send it to people who are worth it. The Grangers. Your family. A few others that come to mind."

"I understand, Harry, but I'm going to have to argue with you on one point. You are worth it, no matter how you're feeling right now. Things will work out between you two – this is just a fight, and they happen."

"Yeah, but I'm me, Ron. Nothing good lasts. Go." When Ron had disappeared, he spun and headed back to the desk, Hermione in hot pursuit. "Sir?" he asked the goblin, who looked at him, a bit startled.

"Yes, Mister Potter?" the goblin asked a moment later.

"I'd like to open another two vaults, if you don't mind, and transfer some into the Weasley Wizarding Wheezes business vault. The two vaults are for Ronald Bilius Weasley, and that should receive two hundred and fifty thousand Galleons, and the second is for Ginevra Molly Weasley, and that amount is one hundred fifty thousand Galleons. Fees as before. The business account should receive one hundred thousand Galleons, and if they ask where it came from, we wouldn't be exactly lying if we said that Sirius Black left it to them, would we?"

The goblin smiled, not showing all those teeth this time, which Harry found to be significantly friendlier. "No, Mister Potter, we would not." The paperwork was quickly at his hand, which he signed, and the keys, marked with the vault number and owner were in his hands.

"Thank you again, sir," Harry said, sketching a bow, and then he looked to Hermione. "Well, I've got their Christmas gifts set."

"Why, Harry?" Hermione asked. "You gave me over 30 million Galleons, and you've managed to give the Weasley's nearly a million between them. Why?"

"Because the only way I end up with money is by people ending up dead. My folks died to save my life, for all the good it really did. Sirius died because I'm simply too fucking stupid to realize when I'm being set up. Both ended up leaving me large sums of money. So, I figure, if I have to be getting this money in the first place, I might as well give it to people who might actually deserve the money, rather than sit there making more money off all the people I've killed to date. What next? A million the day that I get someone else killed? That reminds me – I'd best make sure that Remus picks someone else for his will, since he's likely to have named me, as the son of one of the Marauders. Tell him to give it to you, or to Ron, or the Weasleys. Give it to someone who deserves it, not someone who gets everyone around him killed." Hermione's eyes were filled with tears, and she ran over to her mother and sobbed against her chest. Harry saw the Weasleys approaching, and he headed for the doors.

He never got completely out of anyone's sight, but he was obviously not willing to speak to anyone at the moment. Finally, the day's shopping done, he sat outside Florean Fortescue's waiting for the others to catch up. He sat staring into space, watching Hermione with her parents, and murmured, "Why did they stop me? The world would be so much better off if they'd just let me succeed. All I do is destroy."

"That's not true, Harry," a dreamy voice said from behind him. "You help people quite a lot."

"Yeah, into an early grave. Just ask Sirius about my parents. Oh, I forgot, you can't, because I killed him!" He turned to face Luna Lovegood, the eccentric Ravenclaw.

"No you didn't, Harry. Bellatrix Lestrange cast the spell that made him fall through the veil. He killed himself by not being on his guard. Voldemort was the one who drew you there in the first place. There is plenty of blame to go around."

"Yeah, and Hermione tried to convince me to check with him. I couldn't be bothered to do anything more than a cursory check. So, I got Ron attacked by those brain things, Ginny's ankle broken, Neville's nose broken, and Hermione almost killed. You were the only one to come out unscathed. If you stay my friend this year, Luna, expect something awful. They'll kill your father, or you'll follow me and lose a leg, or an arm, or be disfigured, or even killed. My very existence destroys, Luna. Because of ... something I'll tell you about later, I killed my parents by existing. I destroyed a perfectly happy home life of two Muggles and their son. I killed Cedric. I killed Sirius. I almost killed Hermione and all my friends. Who's next? The Weasleys? Or am I more successful this time, and actually end up getting Ron or Ginny killed? I've already proven that I'm as worthless as the trash that gets thrown out on the streets when it comes to romance. Just ask Cho or Parvati. You can ask someone else, if she's crazy enough to admit knowing me that way." He stood again. "I think I need to talk to Professor Dumbledore. Maybe he can help me out." He looked to her. "I'm sorry I wasn't better company, but I had it pointed out to me, correctly, just how much of a monster I am, earlier today. If you're as smart as your being placed in Ravenclaw suggests, then I think you'll figure out that staying away from me is by far the best thing you can do for yourself and your family. Fight him another way. Being close to me will bring nothing but heartache."

"Then so be it, Harry. I don't desert my friends." She kissed his cheek. "I'm glad your suicide failed," she whispered in his ear before walking away.

He shook his head. *How can I make her understand?* He stood and walked into the Leaky Cauldron, and after getting permission to use the fireplace, placed a Floo call to Dumbledore.

"Come to my office when everyone else meets up with you," he said after Harry told him he needed to talk.

A short time later, they were all in Professor Dumbledore's office. Harry had refused to talk, saying that they'd end up hearing it

in the office they were now in. He had reiterated his previous points, and added one more he hadn't said thus far. "Hermione's reaction made me realize – I am a menace. I stand every likelihood of taking over Tom's job when I defeat him, assuming I do. How much better am I going to be than he is?"

"Hermione's reaction?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yeah. We got talking about the Dursley's, and I said that I wouldn't mourn if they died at Voldemort's hands. I actually want them dead. She's right to be angry and disgusted with me over that! What kind of heartless monster wishes the only living family he has dead! They're the only link I have to my mother, and here I am, wishing that Voldemort would get his hands on them and kill them! Even now, knowing how monstrous that makes me, I can't shake the desire to see them pay, painfully and fatally."

"What kind of a person am I for wanting the people dead who treated me as I deserved?" he screamed into the quiet room. "I am a freak, even amongst wizards! I destroy everything I touch! I deserve to be shunned, if only for wanting my family dead. What hideous kind of thing am I?" The last was said in a whisper, but everyone heard it.

He looked up suddenly. "Sir, Hermione was brought into this under false pretences. What does it take to dissolve a handfasting? She shouldn't be destroying her life being with me. She should be freed from the bond, and then the Grangers memory modified into not remembering this summer. There are things best forgotten." He looked to Helen for a moment. "Another proof of my sheer monstrosity," he whispered into the air. "I agree to go into full time training to learn everything I possibly can in order to kill Voldemort but in return, people need to be modified into feeling differently about me. The Weasleys, the Grangers, Tonks, Remus, Luna – basically, anyone currently crazy enough to care about me. I'd recommend it for you as well, sir. They need to be modified into thinking of me as I really am – the next candidate for Dark Lord." He shook his head. "Wouldn't my parents be just so fucking proud of me, to know that they gave their lives just to protect a monster that should have been drowned at his birth?" He looked up at Dumbledore, not seeing him. "I promise to not attempt suicide again, sir. My job is to kill

Voldemort, since I'm the only one who can. Then the Aurors can take me out before I try to pick up the mantle."

He finally focused on Dumbledore, who was doing something Harry had never seen, and from the reactions of the wizarding adults, neither had they. Dumbledore was shaking with rage so great that he simply could not speak. "Great. Now I manage to anger the greatest living wizard. Before I destroy anything else ..."

He bolted from the room before anyone could stop him. *They'll look for me – they don't see the danger. I can't go anywhere on Hogwarts grounds – Dumbledore will find me in a heartbeat. Where can I go?* He suddenly thought of somewhere, but knew that he'd have to approach it from a different direction. He ran pell-mell for Hogsmeade, escaping the grounds in surprisingly short order, before doubling back and heading for the Forbidden Forest.

Chapter 14

He ran for a time, making it to the Forbidden Forest. He had a vague idea where Aragog stayed, so he avoided that portion of the forest. Finally, he came to a rest and dropped down next to a tree. *The idiots are under the impression that I worth salvaging. Can't they see that I'll just get them killed?*

He heard hoofbeats coming closer. *Oh. I picked their part of the forest to roost in. Makes sense.* "You probably know already," he said in a conversational tone, "but I'm over here."

He found himself looking at five spears pointed at his chest from close range. "Go ahead," Harry said. "Do Voldemort's work for him. Kill me, and no one ever kills Tom Riddle. You get an immortal Dark Lord who hates himself and anyone who reminds him of that. Of course, that pretty well means everyone on the planet, but let's not go there."

"You would do well not to taunt us, human," one of the centaurs sneered. "We told you that we would deal with you if you ever came to our forest again."

"Yeah, who gives a flying shit?" Harry barked, standing, even though several spears poked him hard enough to draw blood. "Go ahead!" he said, leaning into one of the spears. "Do Voldemort's work for him! You do anyway, by sitting back and doing nothing! You're supposed to be these marvellous Divinations scientists, but you do nothing to help! Instead, you sit back and act so damned superior, and bitch and moan about being treated unfairly by the humans."

He looked at the one whose spear was deepest in his chest. "So what?!" he bellowed. "So a bigoted human got you classified such that you fall through the cracks. You can either work to change things, or you can become perfect tools for any dark lord that comes along by sitting back and doing nothing. Fine, the Centaur Liaison Office was created as a sop to you. Where do you think the beginning of real change comes from, you morons? You can either sit back and do nothing, being arrogantly superior that you'll outlast those annoying and bigoted humans, or you can get out there and

work on changing things. Oh, but then you'd have to give up your own bigotries, and admit that maybe part of the solution rests with you. Let's chuck that one, and exile anyone who suggests that working with humans is a necessity." He shook his head. "If you're going to kill me, then kill me. Rid the world of one more vile monster."

He could hear people coming through the Forest, and cursed. "Please, if you have to kill someone, let it be me. I was stupid, yet again, and forgot that they'd be able to find me. I've killed enough people by existing. If anyone else has to die because of me, let it be me. They're simply looking for me."

One of the centaurs got a calculating look to his eyes. "What will you pledge to keep them safe, rather than have us kill them, as they should be for trespassing after our warning of nearly three moons ago?"

He stared in the centaur's face. "I pledge that my life will be the only one you will take. I pledge that these people mean enough to me that I will destroy every centaur living in this forest if you kill innocent people. I also pledge, with all that I can, that I will work in whatever way I can to improve conditions between humans and the beings that fall between the cracks. This will, of course, require that I survive the fight with Voldemort without becoming the monster I seemed to be destined to be."

"We see no such transformation in your future, Harry," spoke another. "If monster you are to become, then monster you are now. And we see no evidence of that in your willingness to die for those who look for you." He turned and shouted. "The human you seek is here."

The group came at a run and was surprised to see the centaurs now tending Harry's minor chest wounds. "Harry!" Hermione cried as she saw him, and came running to him. She knelt next to him, crying.

"Why did you fall for such a loathsome creature, Hermione?" he asked sadly. "You deserve someone better. Not someone who can't even properly show gratitude to people."

"Harry ..." she began.

"I mean, you were right to be angry and disgusted with me! While sort of ... thing ... can't show gratitude to the people who raised him? They saw me for what I am – a freak – and they treated me the way I deserved. I destroy what I touch, Hermione. My parents died because of a stupid prophecy – about me. Cedric died – because I exist. Sirius died – because I can't be bothered to do things the right way. Your family – look at the crap they've been through this summer. Because of me. I anger the centaurs. Your mother – knowing me, I've left some psychic residue, and she'll end up with some vile scenario happening to her. You. I love you Hermione. I love you so much that to keep you safe, I *have* to leave you. I'll destroy you, otherwise. I'm a monster in human guise, Hermione. My wanting the very people who raised me dead proves that. Some repayment for raising me, hmm?" He put his head into his hands, and whether he wanted to or not, began to cry.

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Ron watched this in horror. "What happened?" he finally asked. "What happened to put him in this mood?"

"More than any one human should ever have to live through," Helen said, tears in her own eyes. "And Hermione, unfortunately, brought this one about. It would have happened, but she was the catalyst. Even with all those pictures, and the hospital, and everything else, she can't quite grasp the horror that Harry must have grown up with. I'm not saying that I understand it myself, but I grasp why Harry wants them dead." She sighed. "But she grew up in a loving family, as did you, and you can't really wrap your brains around the true evil that exists in the world."

They were interrupted when Harry shouted, "How can you say that I deserve to be loved? I destroy what I touch, Hermione! The Weasleys – look at them! Percy would still be talking with them if I weren't around! *I'm the very reason he won't speak with them, Hermione!* If I wasn't the human entropy engine, they'd still be happy together! Instead, I had to walk into their lives and tear them apart."

Ron couldn't handle it. "Yeah, Harry, if you hadn't come into our lives, look how well off we'd be. Ginny would be dead in the Chamber of

Secrets, and Tom Riddle would be walking the world. We'd be mourning the loss of the only Weasley girl born in generations. Yeah, we'd be real happy if you didn't exist, Harry. I have my sister to hug and argue with, and worry about her boyfriends because none of them are good enough for her, and all those other things that siblings do to each other, for the simple reason that *you* exist, Harry. I've never thanked you for that, and that's just wrong." He knelt next to his friend of five years and hugged him. "Thank you for saving my sister's life, Harry. We can never repay *you* for that, and you turn around and give us money because you think you can't repay *us*." He grinned at his friend, not caring that his eyes were misty. "Percy's a git, and would have found a different reason to break contact with us. You were just his excuse."

Hermione smiled too. "Yeah, you do so good a job of destroying everything that you touch that you married someone whose life you saved, Harry. I'd be dead if not for a certain self-proclaimed monster. My parents still have a daughter because of you, Harry. The" She turned to make sure it was safe to speak. "The Order of the Phoenix was reactivated because *you* told the people who believe in you that V-Voldemort is back. People are getting prepared to fight him because *you* exist, Harry. They have a hope for survival because *you* exist, Harry."

"I was wrong, Harry. Mum helped me see that. The Dursleys did everything in their power to make you hate them – to break you and destroy you. You aren't the monster for hating them, Harry. They're the monsters for doing to a baby what they did. And here I come along, looking down from my ivory tower, trying to tell you about your life. Which one of us is the monster, Harry? The one who finally finds it in his heart to hate people who truly deserve it, and no one else – or the person who waltzes in and informs people what's right and wrong, without understanding the situation?"

"I will not hear you call yourself a monster, Hermione. You had a happy home life. Of course you wouldn't understand about the Dursleys, and I'll kill anyone who tries to give you first hand experience. I was raised by monsters. What else could I grow up to be?"

"The sweet, caring young man that I am proud to call my son-in-law," Helen finally said. "By rights, the upbringing you had should have turned you into someone willing to walk into Little Whinging and start indiscriminately killing, starting at Number four Privet Drive. Instead, somehow, you became a caring and surprisingly gentle young man." Her eyes twinkled with that last remark. "Trust me, Hermione and I appreciate that gentleness in you." She actually cracked a smile at that. "Harry, does my wanting the Dursleys dead for what they did to such a sweet and caring young man make me a monster?"

"No, but you weren't raised by them," he said. "For all intents and purposes, they were my parents. What does it say when I want my guardians murdered by the same man who killed my birth parents, and who wants me dead? Someone who I know will do it excruciatingly. Even now, thinking it through, I can't bring myself to even wish them a quick death. I want them to suffer. That has to make me a monster."

"Then I am a monster as well, Harry," Albus Dumbledore said, tears in his eyes. "I feel hate and a rage that I have not felt for a very long time, and so much of it is aimed at myself. I look at a young man I was supposed to protect, and I know that I failed him miserably. I should not wish this, but I so desire to emotionally destroy the Dursleys for so horribly damaging the son of the two finest people I have ever known."

"Sir ..." Harry said, and then dropped his head again. "I'm doing it again. Who else will I corrupt during my life? The greatest wizard for the side of light, and because of me, he's contemplating dark acts." He looked up. "Can you deny it, sir? That you're the closest to performing them that you've been in years?"

"No, Harry, I cannot deny it. Are you the only one with free will on this world, however? I think not. We all make our choices. The Dursleys need to be reminded that there are consequences to their choices. Vernon has begun that process, and Petunia and Dudley are beginning to learn. But they blame you for it. We shall protect them as best we can, but we will not waste resources on them, Harry. And I know you well enough that you will blame yourself if

they die. I cannot stop that blame, but know that they do not deserve it." He smiled. "Realize the fact that the very belief that you are a monster, and your desire to distance yourself from those you love, proves beyond any shadow of doubt that you are no monster, Harry. If you were the monster you believe, then you would not care what happened to us. Instead, you fear for us, and what will happen if we stay too close to you. I speak not for anyone but myself, Harry, but I willingly accept the risk of being close to you. Perhaps someday I shall properly earn the honour of being your friend, but I accept the potential danger of being close to you."

"So do I," Helen said. "I have no magic, but I will defend you to the best of my ability, Harry. I love you, if only for what you have done for my daughter. If you're a monster, then so am I. I want them to suffer horribly for what their treatment has done to a fine, gentle young man."

"Both of us are monsters," Doug said. "I could so easily spend years subjecting Petunia and Dudley to the treatment that they gave you. Luckily, Vernon is going to get a few years worth of understanding what he did to you." He was red. "I am so furious at them for making you into the type of person who decides that he's at fault for all the ills of the world. You are not wrong to hate them and wish them harm. You're only a monster if you let it colour your entire life, and let it make all your decisions."

"As Tom did," Dumbledore said quietly.

"You are no monster, Harry Potter," spoke one of the centaurs. "In your fear, you were still able to threaten us in the name of your friends, and even then, pledge to help us. We will not hold you to your pledge of help, but if you need us in your battle against the darkness, we will be here for you. You now have the same entry privileges that we have granted your headmaster Dumbledore." They looked to Hermione. "You are his soul mate. You also are granted this permission." He looked up at the group. "As are all who left this school to accompany him two moon passings ago." Both Ginny and Ron stepped forward and bowed to the centaurs.

"You might not hold me to my pledge, but I will," Harry said. "Your treatment isn't right."

"That is why we will not hold you to it, Harry Potter. You will do a far greater job holding yourself to it than we could compel. You are too honourable to do otherwise." He smiled an honest smile. "And what monster can be called honourable? Release your self hatred, and you will become truly the weapon that can destroy the darkness that threatens the world." He looked to Helen, and then back to Harry. "Things will happen. They have happened. Live with what will be, and know that people will be happy." He looked to Hermione, and then to Harry. "I would recommend thinking twice about cancelling the bonding to this one. Losing half of yourself is a painful experience."

"Now, I think it best if you return to the castle and deal with what needs to be dealt with."

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Back in the headmaster's office, they all sat again. "This has been an eventfully day," Albus finally said.

"All thanks to the drama queen," Harry grumbled. "Well, drama king."

"I'll thank you not to insult my husband," Hermione said, hugging his arm. "If his wife could learn to hold her tongue occasionally, perhaps he wouldn't have had reason to react the way he did."

Helen laughed. "How about we apportion blame where it belongs. All of us dropped the ball, if only a little bit. Hermione overreacted, Harry did the same, and the rest of us didn't remember just how fresh the wounds are that made him attempt suicide a short time ago."

"If I may," Molly Weasley asked, "what caused him to attempt suicide?" She looked at Harry with worry.

Harry opened his mouth to respond, but Helen beat him to it. "My story, Harry. I know how you'll tell it." She proceeded to explain the situation that had led to his attempted suicide. "He won't forgive

himself, and so far, he's the only one." She smiled as she happened to hear Ginny murmur, "Lucky bitch," with a smile on her face. Helen's eyes twinkled, bringing a deep blush from Ginny, and a mouthed "Sorry."

"Harry's version would have been much more self-deprecating, and likely be phrased to make *you* want to kill him," Doug said quickly. "Those damned Dursleys trained him quite well to take the blame for everything." He grinned suddenly. "Now on to somewhat happier things, he says, intentionally changing the subject radically. How go preparations on this end for the upcoming nuptials?"

"Ah, yes!" Dumbledore said with a smile. "We are quite prepared here. I will be performing the ceremony, with the permission of the prospective bride and groom."

Harry looked to Hermione. "Even with my little psychotic episodes like just a while ago, do you still want to marry me?"

She leaned in and kissed his mouth gently. "Yes, my Harry. You are still going to be my husband. I do not choose to dissolve the handfasting bonding, and I *do* choose to strengthen it through the vows we will exchange on my birthday." She paused. "Harry, this is your fault. I'm getting poetic." She smiled at him.

He returned the smile, weakly. "I just ... I don't know what to do anymore. I've had some wonderful things happen this summer, but ... well, it's like the bit that happened with you, Helen. I ... damn it, I enjoyed it, and a part of me is glad that it happened. And that just seems so wrong to me!"

Helen came over to him. "I understand. You're a one woman man, and you still see it as having had an affair. You think you betrayed us all by enjoying it." She kissed his forehead. "You'll get past that someday. The betrayal is if you scheme to make it happen again." He looked horrified at the thought. "Exactly. Talk to your therapist, and someday you'll get past this."

Hermione stepped back into the conversation. "Now, the official word is that we'll be telling people is that we're getting married to get him

free of the Dursleys. Only a handful of people know that we're already married." She looked at the headmaster. "They say that suffering is good for the soul, but those are going to be nineteen very long days, sir," she smiled at him.

"Ah yes, that reminds me. Would you like to follow me? I have something to show you."

They were all curious about the twinkle in the man's eyes, so the procession was formidable. As they approached the entrance to Gryffindor Tower, Harry was surprised to see the headmaster stop up against the wall, about twenty feet from the Fat Lady's portrait. "Ah, Lady Katherine! I'm here to show the room to its occupants." A portrait of a pretty young woman with hair that could only be described as Weasley Red smiled back and said, "Excellent, Headmaster! Are they moving in now?"

"No, they will be moving in on September 1st, when the rest of the students move into their dormitories." He motioned for them to step closer.

"Harry Potter! Hermione Granger! So you're finally getting married! Wonderful! I think you'll love the way these rooms look!" The painting swung inward, exposing a cosy room with three doors exiting it.

They stepped in to what was a pleasant little room reminiscent of the Gryffindor common room, which Harry suspected was reachable from the door to his left. The other two doors were on the same wall, directly before them. They opened them, and found two bedrooms. "Now, we know that you will be sharing a bed, being already married, but this layout allows the fiction that you are merely engaged to be upheld. On the nineteenth of September, while you are being married before those of the student body that you wish allowed, we shall remove the bed you are not using and convert the room into an office for the two of you." Hermione's eyes lit up.

Harry cleared his throat. "Hermione? I have a question for the professor, but I don't want it to sound wrong." She nodded. "I think everyone is going to assume that we're sleeping together

already." He turned to Hermione. "Actually, I should be saying this to you."

"I think I know what you're suggesting, Harry," she said with a smile. "I think they need it this way to keep up the illusion. If they do only one bed, they're tacitly permitting us to have premarital sex."

"True. That's why I have you in my life. One of us has to be smart enough to think things through." He grimaced and said beneath his breath, "I rarely do."

"None of that, Harry," Hermione said. "Or are you going to make me spank you?"

Harry's face went flat at that, and Hermione got worried for just a moment, until she saw the eye twinkle. "Hmm, we haven't tried *that* yet," he said, deadpan.

"Harry!" she squeaked, amidst relieved laughter in the room.

Finally smiling, Harry turned to Dumbledore and said, "Sir, thank you very much. Aren't you going to get in trouble with the governors by allowing us these quarters before our official wedding day?"

"When I explain these precautions, and the fact that moving you after the year has started will cause greater disruption, then I believe that they will acquiesce. If they don't – well, I have never complained before, but I believe that I shall remind them who is truly in power at this school. The school has existed prior to the Board, and ultimate power rests in the headmaster's hands." He laughed. "Actually, the ultimate power at this school rests with the school itself. When I began to ponder the question, Harry, the castle itself made me aware of this suite. I had not known of its existence prior to that, and I have been headmaster here for some time." Meeting both pairs of eyes, he said, "The castle likes the both of you, and does what it can to help you." His eyes sparkled. "Don't be surprised if the castle helps you locate places for ... ah ... romantic liaisons, after the wedding has been performed."

Harry's eyebrows rose, and a smile began to cross his face as his eyes unfocused. "Precisely, Harry," Albus laughed. He looked to

Harry and Hermione and became serious. "Harry, you and I had a certain conversation after your suicide attempt. May I speak with you and your wife alone for a short time?" Harry looked to Hermione, who nodded. The others left the room to wait in the hall.

"You had considered a method of granting Hermione's parents some level of magical power," he said when the door was closed. "I told you I would look into it. It is possible, Harry, but dangerous."

"I won't put them in danger," Harry said. "So we scrap that idea."

"They won't be in any danger. The spell involves the sacrifice of a portion of a witch or wizard's own power in order to activate the capability latent in all human beings. It is believed that the sacrificed portion will eventually regenerate. But, it is possible for the spell to completely drain the donor, permanently robbing them of their own ability to cast spells."

"Okay, when do I do it?" Hermione asked.

"You don't, beloved," Harry said. "I do. I seem to have power to spare, and I somehow doubt that the prophecy is going to let me be completely drained. Besides, how do we know that this isn't the fulfilment of the prophecy? We both want them able to magically defend themselves, and this is in some way a repayment for the violation I performed. If I lose my ability to do magic, then it was the proper payment for the debt."

"Harry ..." Hermione said.

"Plus they'll have one hell of a brilliant teacher around in the guise of their daughter to help them train up." He looked at the headmaster. "She's right about the question, though, sir. When do I do it?"

"Except for the potion that they will be required to drink, everything is in preparation, and Severus is working on that as we speak."

"Have you told him who it's for?" Harry asked.

"No. Why should that have an effect?" Albus asked, making it quite obvious that he knew what Harry was suggesting.

Harry pretended that he didn't know what Albus was saying and said, "Because if he knew, he'd be fighting the impulse to ruin it, just to harm me."

"How can you think so little of his potion-making, Harry?" Albus asked sadly.

"Oh no, it's not that. I appreciate that he's a Master, and that his reputation might be at stake. But I'm betting that it was a truly difficult potion – one that would not ruin his reputation if he *did* fail, by some oddity. Also, if he could find a way to strike a lasting blow at me, I think that would make him very happy, sir. I think if he thought he could permanently strike a blow at me, he just might be willing to screw up a potion."

"How little you know me, Potter," sneered Professor Snape as he opened the door, holding two small flasks.

"Oh, I think I know you far better than you want me to, sir. You and I are cut from the same cloth."

He had never seen Snape turn puce before, and he was quite aware that it was not a complementary colour for anyone's skin. "I truly hope, Potter, that this spell works to grant me one of my fondest wishes."

"No, it won't kill me," Harry responded.

"Oh no, Potter – that would be over too quickly. I find that I desire that the spell remove all traces of magic from you. Did the headmaster tell you that if such a thing happened, that you become, for lack of a better term, allergic to the same spell? I pray that this ritual works to greatest effect. Finally rid the school of Potter spawn once and for all."

Harry and Hermione merely looked at him and started laughing. "He hasn't been told yet, has he sir?" Hermione finally gasped.

"No, Severus has not been made aware of the situation to date." Albus Dumbledore was looking less than pleased with the route this conversation had taken.

"Don't tell him, then. Let him find out from the Daily Prophet."

"Why would I read that rag, Miss Granger?"

She laughed even harder. "Even better! He gets to find out in September!"

"There are things you should know about Harry's ..." Albus began to say to Severus Snape.

"No!" Harry interrupted loudly. "I don't give you permission to tell him that."

"It might help him to understand you better, Harry."

"And probably make him hate me all the more. He has chosen, since my very first day here at Hogwarts back in 1991, to conveniently forget that I am *not* James Potter, and didn't even get a chance to know the man, because of the abomination that he served then, and possibly serves now. I have been, in his mind, an arrogant spoiled child ever since my birth. Well, I've decided to grant him his fondest wish. He wants me to be James Potter, I'll be James Potter to him." He stared the snarling Potions Master in the face. "I'll prove to him that it was a bad idea to make an enemy of me. When I'm done with you, you son of a bitch, you'll go crawling to Voldemort to beg for a quick death by being *Crucio'd*." He spun and exited the room, almost running into Helen and Doug.

As he left, he heard a sneered, "And that is the last best hope for the wizarding world? We are doomed."

He stormed down the hallway, everyone else except Albus in hot pursuit. He didn't stop until he almost collided with Minerva McGonagall. He was shaking with rage.

Stopping, he took several deep breaths before trying to speak. Before he could, she spoke. "From that reaction, I assume

that you either were told something you did not wish to hear, or that you met the head of Slytherin House."

"Head is right," Harry murmured quietly. "He's the biggest dick I've ever met." He met her eyes to see the quirked eyebrow and mostly hidden smile. "My apologies, Professor. I spoke crudely in front of someone undeserving of it."

"He does that to all of us sometimes, Harry," she chuckled. "I have no problems as long as you don't do it during the school year where I can hear it. What did he do this time?"

"Informed me that when we do the spell to grant magical abilities to Hermione's parent, he hopes that it will remove all capability to perform spells from me, leaving me a Muggle. Not even a Squib – a Muggle." He laughed. "I'm sorry, but you won't be seeing the House Cup for the next couple years. I told him that if couldn't tell the difference between me and my dad, then I was going to *be* my dad. He wants to be my enemy by choice, he'll *be* my enemy. *My* choice."

She shook her head. "We've all told him this childish hatred of you was going to reap a bitter harvest."

"I am forced to admit that you are correct, Minerva," Albus said as he came up behind the group. "He refuses to release his hatred, and so dooms himself." He looked to Harry, who had turned to face him. "I would admonish you, but I begin to see what I have overheard the students talking about. All I ask is that you attempt to keep the mayhem to a minimum, Harry. As little collateral damage as possible, please? I know that if I tell you not to, you will anyway."

"No sir. If you order me not to, then I will do nothing against the Potions professor."

Albus smiled. "But will your wife and best friend agree to listen to me?"

"That's their decision, sir. If you order me not to do anything, then I won't, but I will not speak for them."

Ron snorted behind them. "Oh, I'll promise if you want me to. 'Course, that means old greasy hair will discover the power of teamwork. You think that we can't get the Gryffindors and the others to help us?"

"That's what scares me," McGonagall said with a smile.

"Sir?" Harry asked, changing the subject. "When should we do this spell, and where?"

"I believe that some time next week would be good." He looked to Helen and Doug. "Have you been making the arrangements I mentioned?" They nodded. "Excellent. How does this upcoming Friday sound to you?" They nodded.

Chapter 15

They gathered that Friday everyone important to the spell gathered in the headmaster's study at Hogwarts. Severus Snape was there to administer the potion, Harry and Hermione were their as donors (Hermione finally having won her argument with Harry about donating her abilities), of course Helen and Doug were there, and Albus Dumbledore was there with Minerva McGonagall and Filius Flitwick to actually perform the spell.

"All that is left for the potions is three drops of blood from the donor," Snape said. "If you would, Potter?"

"By all means, Snape," he answered calmly, and stepped forward to the goblets.

"Wait," asked Hermione. "What happens if more than three drops of blood go into the potion, Professor?" she asked, stressing his title slightly.

"The effects are unknown, Miss Granger," came the response, stressing the Miss. "I do not have access to the originator's design notes, but it can be assumed that three was arrived at after some trial and error. I would not wish to experiment at this point in time," he said with some condescending asperity.

"Thank you," she said brightly, and picked up the silver knife. "Harry, since we've agreed to donate together, you put one drop in one goblet and two in the other, and I'll do the same." Before Snape could say anything, she pricked her finger and carefully placed her blood in the goblets precisely as she had suggested, and then moved her finger to her mouth. Harry repeated the action, ensuring that neither goblet received more than three drops of blood in total. Both potions flared momentarily, and settled into a pleasant periwinkle blue colour.

"Huh," Harry mused. "The same colour as your Yule Ball dress in fourth year."

"Yes, quite," the headmaster replied. "Quite an attractive colour, I must say."

"And quite unexpected that it worked," the Potions professor sneered. "Even now, when lives could be at stake, you both flout the rules. By rights, it should have been three drops of blood from one person. I take no responsibility for the results of this ... this ..."

"Bite me, Snape," Harry said. "I see why my father called you Snivellus now. Is that all you ever do – whine about things?"

Once again, the Potions master proved that puce is not a good colour for anyone, especially not someone as pale as himself. Before a full blown fight could happen, Dumbledore looked to the combatants and said, "Perhaps this can be continued after the spell has been completed?"

Harry, at least, managed to look abashed. He stepped back from the goblets, and Dumbledore stepped forward to pick them up. Handing the goblets to the Grangers, he looked to Snape. "Drink it in one draught, correct, Severus?" At the Potions master's nod, the two brought the goblets to their lips. Doug made a face as he swallowed, but Helen's reaction made Harry curious about her career as a college student. She simply poured the goblet into her mouth and set it down quickly, only then making a face.

As her husband finished his and set the goblet down, she murmured, "Blech. Feels like a ferret exploded in my mouth." Doug snorted and fought to not burst out laughing.

"How did you drink that so fast?" Hermione asked, astounded.

"Chug-a-lug champion at my school. Secret is to open your throat and simply pour." She smiled. "Shall we start the spell, then?" she asked brightly. She hid it well, but her fear was evident.

As Flitwick and McGonagall began the spell, speaking its original Latin, Harry reached out and took Hermione's hand in nervousness. As the High Latin they spoke finally died out, they pointed their wands at the ceiling and began a complex series of

swishes, flicks and swoops before finally dropping their wands and sheathing them.

Harry opened his mouth to say something, and suddenly he felt something shoot down his arm to Hermione's hand, and watched as a cloud of silver flowed from them and settled over her parents. As soon as it was finished, all four quickly settled into chairs Dumbledore created for them. Almost immediately, they fell asleep.

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Harry awoke a short time later to see the others stirring as well. "Interesting," Albus said. "You all awoke at the same time. I wonder if that is a side effect of the spell."

"We can explore that later," Minerva said. "First, we need to see if these two are still capable of performing spells."

Flitwick smiled and place a feather on the table. "Miss Granger? I think you know the spell I would like to see you perform."

Harry laughed. "Remember, Hermione. It's Win-GAR-dium Levi-OH-sa. Stress the GAR."

"Prat," she laughed, realizing that he'd both a perfect impression of her first year instructions to Ron. She pulled her wand and cast the spell. The feather vanished. The only sound in the room was Fawkes, and if Harry didn't know better, he'd think the phoenix was chuckling. As they looked around the room, Harry followed Fawkes' eyes, which appeared to be focused on the ceiling. He followed, and his jaw dropped. There in the stone ceiling was the feather, imbedded point first.

"Um," was all he was able to say. He pulled his own wand and pointed it at the feather. "Accio feather." There was an audible crack, and the wind was knocked from Harry as intense pain hit his stomach. He looked down to see red spots forming in his shirt.

Minerva McGonagall rushed to him to examine him. "Oh my goodness!" she exclaimed. "He's bleeding! The remnants of the feather ..." She waved her wand a few times, and then looked to

Flitwick. "You're better with charms, quite obviously, Filius. Care to do the healing? I've converted the feather pieces into mere water, which should not be a problem within his system." Flitwick murmured a few words and the pain went away.

"What happened?" Harry asked.

"It appears that your spellcasting is far more powerful now than we would expect, Harry," Albus Dumbledore said. "It appears to have increased, rather than decreased, as would be expected."

"Yes," Flitwick agreed. "This will require further study. In the meantime" He turned to face Hermione's parents. "Which of you would care to go first? Same spell as your daughter cast, only with a new feather," he finished with a smile.

Doug looked at the assembled group. "Um, we don't have wands."

Albus smiled. "We have general purpose wands for those whose wands have been damaged beyond repair." He looked to Harry. "Mr. Weasley should have inquired, but I understand pride." Harry nodded, knowing the reference to his second year. He reached into his desk, pulled out two plain wands and handed them to the Grangers. Doug took the initiative. "*Wingardium Leviosa*," he said clearly, performing the precise swish-and-flick he'd seen his daughter perform. The feather quivered on the table before gently lifting for just a moment.

"Excellent!" Flitwick exclaimed. "For a very first attempt, that's one of the best I've ever seen! The best was your daughter's, of course."

"Of course," Doug said. "My daughter excels at anything she puts her mind to. If she wants to do it well, she will."

Harry's face went flat, but he knew his eyes were twinkling madly. "Harry!" squeaked Hermione, playfully slapping his arm.

"What? I didn't say anything!" he laughed.

"You didn't have to, Harry," replied Helen with her own laugh. She repeated her husband's attempt with similar results.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore said, echoing Flitwick's comment. "Now we only need to get you to Ollivander's for your own wands, and then we shall begin the process of tutoring you." He looked at the ceiling for a moment. "Yes, the empty teacher's quarters we were originally going to give Harry and Hermione will serve quite well, I'd say."

"Headmaster, why are we even contemplating this? Once again we coddle this child," Severus Snape said, motioning to Harry. "He is an irresponsible brat that flouts every rule. Despite my better judgement, I must take him into my N.E.W.T. level Potions classes because he somehow managed to pass the test with the required grade. But now he and his ... lover get their own room, against all rules of the school, not to mention common decency. And her parents move in after we effect the transference of magical ability upon them. Am I even permitted to ask the reasoning behind this, or are you going to be inscrutable again?"

Harry looked at him. "The Dursleys broke the protections around me, sir," he said, his voice dripping sarcasm on the 'sir.' "Hermione and I are getting married on September nineteenth in order to grant me protections. It is easier and less disruptive on the students to permit us to begin the school year living in the same suite, rather than move us eighteen days after we get back to the castle." He paused for breath, but spoke again before the Potions master could. "Also, since your lord and master wants me dead or worse, I used what you consider my pitiful mental skills to deduce that it was highly likely, once word got back to him, that he would choose to use Hermione's parents against me. So, we give them some ability to protect themselves, and move them here. Harder for Moldieshorts to do something to them."

"Harry," Albus said.

"I'm sorry, Professor, but if he insists on treating me as if I were my father, despite *knowing* that the man has been dead since I was fifteen months old, then let him reap the benefits. When we are in school, I will treat him with the minimal respect due a professor at this school – his title, answering questions when asked, and such. I fully expect that Gryffindor will be docked house points for my insolence. Then again, he'll dock Gryffindor points for breathing,

while allowing Slytherin to get away with murder." He paused. "However, when we are *not* in school, meaning during the summer hols, I have every intention of giving him the respect he has earned from me, not the respect that he thinks his title demands."

"You and your pampered upbringing," Snape started to say, but was stopped as Helen's open hand impacted with his cheek hard enough to stagger him.

"Do not speak of things you know nothing of, you loathsome creature!" she snarled at him. "You have no idea what he was like just this summer alone! He"

"Please, Mum," Harry said. "I didn't give the headmaster permission for the same reason that I don't give you permission. Herr Professor here would likely assume that I set up the situation myself in order to get sympathy for my supposed plight. There is not a thing I can do that isn't a side effect of the marvellously pampered life I lived, growing up in a Muggle household as The Boy Who Lived."

"The spell is done, and my presence is no longer required, correct?" asked Snape. At the headmaster's nod, he swirled his cloak and left.

"Off he runs to tell Moldie about the wedding," Harry murmured. "I hate this. He brings out the worst in me. I don't like the person I am when I'm near him."

"Might I ask what situation you refer to?" Professor Flitwick asked. "The one that you don't wish him to know about? I will perfectly understand if you choose not to tell me."

"May I request of you that you not tell Professor Snape? I can't stop you from doing so, but I'd simply prefer he not ever find out." Professor Flitwick nodded, and Harry launched into the years at the Dursleys that he could recall. He finally reached the summer they were currently experiencing, and Flitwick's face went red as Harry's voice went flat as he described the treatment he had received from Vernon, and running away, and finding the Grangers. Harry looked down to see that somewhere in his talking, Hermione had taken his hand, and was wincing at the strength with which Harry was gripping

it. "Oh, I'm sorry, Hermione," he said sadly, bringing her hand to his lips as he loosened his grip. "Why didn't you say something?"

"You needed it, Harry. Besides, when we have children, I'll be doing the same to you, so I'll get mine back." She looked to Flitwick. "We're getting married on my birthday to give him some level of protection. It doesn't hurt that I happen to be madly in love with him." She pulled him closer and kissed his cheek.

"Hermione," he said, his heart in his eyes, "There isn't a word that describes how I feel about you. Without you, I'm not. You create me, you build me, you complete me." He paused. "And you make me spout really cheesy romance novel lines," he finished with a grin.

"I've watched you these past years, Harry," Flitwick said, "and I can tell you that being with her is apparently excellent for you. This is the happiest I remember seeing you."

"Well, when a woman like this gifts you with her love, only an idiot turns it down, and despite a certain professor's opinion of me, I'm no idiot." He kissed her gently on the lips, getting lost in the feelings pouring off her. *Oh my god, I love this woman! I just wish I could prove it to her.*

He felt startlement, and the kiss broke. *Harry? Can you hear what I'm thinking?*

His eyebrows rose. "Yes."

Let's prove it. The rain in Spain falls ...

"... mostly on the Spaniards," he chuckled. Her eyes went so wide that they looked about ready to drop out of her head. He grinned. *It appears to work both ways. Did you note that we have our own bathroom and water closet in that suite? Nice shower, too.* He quickly sent an image of her on the night of their handfasting, and she bit her lower lip. Looking up at the assembled teachers, he said, "We appear to be telepathic with each other at the moment."

"Interesting," said Flitwick and McGonagall in unison. Flitwick looked at them and said, "While this effect is in existence, may I study it?"

"You helped my parents understand my world better," Hermione said. "I have no problems with it, although I can't speak for Harry."

"You did in this matter, beloved," he said. "By the way, you have my word as a Gryffindor that I will not give in to Ron's thoughts that I should get Hermione to give me all the answers. Wouldn't make a very good teacher if I cheated to get good grades now, would I?" He grinned at Minerva McGonagall. "At least I didn't give my word as a Junior Marauder."

The three teachers laughed, and Hermione's parents looked a little confused. He looked to Hermione, and she looked about to burst with pride. He looked at her, puzzled. *What? What did I do right?*

I'll help when I can, but you promised not to use this to your advantage.

I didn't say that, he chuckled, and sent her a quick burst of his favourite view of her, her face lost in passion beneath him.

"Harry!" she gasped.

"Sorry, just earning my membership in the Junior Marauders. So, should we make a trip to Diagon Alley to buy your parents their new wands?"

"Harry," Hermione purred at him, "you're going to die tonight. It'll be with a grin on your face, but it's going to happen."

The look of feigned innocence brought laughter to everyone's faces.

#####

The trip to Diagon Alley was unusual for the Grangers, because for the first time, it was for themselves that things were being purchased. Harry enjoyed nuzzling Hermione's neck in public, causing more than one person to look a little surprised. *Good. The Daily Prophet's going to have a field day with this.*

A short time later, as they were exiting the bookstore, they were met by Rita Skeeter. "Daily Prophet. Looks like I was right, Mister Potter,

back during the Tri-Wizard competition, concerning you and Miss Granger. Any comments about that?" A small crowd had grown around her, since it was fairly obvious that she made no secret of her life as a reporter.

"Well, Miss Skeeter, I guess it has to happen to everyone at some time or another," Harry replied with a smile.

"What's that?" she asked, a saccharine smile plastered on her own face.

"Being right. It had to happen to you eventually." He turned to leave, but turned back around to face her. "You might as well write what you want. The only time you've ever written a truthful story was the one you wrote for the Quibbler – the one that the Prophet then tried to claim as their exclusive a few months later. That acid green quill of yours writes what you want it to, and you never tell the truth if you can help it. I could be utterly truthful to you about what's going on, and you'd twist it to your own best interests. I'll find it interesting to see what you make of this conversation." He turned back to Hermione and offered his arm. "Shall we?"

When they were a distance away, Hermione said, "You know she's going to twist that horribly."

He grinned at her and turned into the Daily Prophet's main doorway. "I know. That's why I'm going to talk to someone here. Make it interesting when she turns in *her* story."

They left a short time later, Harry having given the cover story in both meanings of the phrase, since he knew that this would grace the front page. He'd been protected by the Dursleys until they'd broken the protections this summer, and he was marrying the girl he loved much earlier than either of them intended, if only to allow some level of protection. The writer asked the obvious question, stating that people were going to think it anyway. "True. I'd say that the baby will be born probably thirty-six to sixty months from now. Who knows – we might end up having one nine months after the wedding, but I don't think either of us is quite prepared for dealing with a baby *and* school at the same time. Married life and school is going to be bad

enough. But for this woman?" he said, smiling at Hermione. "She's worth the effort."

Hermione grinned for a moment. "Remember that when I'm pestering you about studying for your N.E.W.T.s, Harry."

"Well, you could quiz me, and give me a kiss for every right answer, to be given when the quiz is over. Subtract one for every wrong answer. If that won't drive me to succeed, then nothing will." *And maybe some mind-blowing sex if I get a perfect score. No – wait – you already give me mind-blowing sex. Need something else.* She blushed prettily at him.

"Thank you for coming to us, Mister Potter. Given some of the treatment that the Prophet has given you in the past"

"Well, to be honest, I was accosted by Rita Skeeter in Diagon Alley, so I thought I'd try to get a truthful report about what's happening out there. And since she was representing herself as your reporter"

"Understood. It should be interesting to see the differences between her story and mine."

"I look forward to reading yours," Harry said.

Chapter 16

The trip to King's Cross was an interesting one that September first. The Grangers had worked very hard to close their house up for a year, taking leaves of absence from their jobs for a period of time, all in the span of about a week. They'd been successful in it, and were taking the train to Hogwarts with Harry and Hermione.

Ron and Ginny showed up first, and were quickly reminded that as far as anyone else in the school was concerned, the article in the *Prophet* was correct – Harry and Hermione were marrying on the nineteenth. “Got it,” Ron said. “Bit surprised to see you two here,” he admitted, speaking to Helen and Doug.

“Well, where better to learn magic than at our daughter’s school?” Doug said with a smile as Luna and Neville entered the compartment. Seats were at a premium in the small space, until Ginny simply sat on Neville’s lap. A few moments later, Harry started to chuckle as her eyes widened slightly, and she turned to look at a furiously blushing Neville.

“Thank you,” she said to him, and nestled closer to him. Neville’s eyes widened, and the smile that appeared threatened to split his face completely.

“May I, Ronald?” Luna asked, pointing at his sister. “I don’t expect that you’ll react the way I think he did, but it will make it easier for everyone to fit in here.”

Before he could say anything, Harry chuckled. “Ron, you have a chance to have a pretty girl sit on your lap, and it’s even her choice. I’d take it, if I were you.”

Ron looked up at Luna for a moment, staring. It must have suddenly struck him about her appearance, because he suddenly blushed as red as Neville, and tapped his leg to motion to her.

She sat pleasantly on his lap, and within a few moments, Harry was biting back the laugh that wanted to explode out of him as he watched Ron mouthing the words, “Don’t say it, Luna. Please don’t

say it." The laugh changed to a pleased smile, though, when he saw the beatific smile on her face and the gentle glistening of tears down her cheeks. Wisely, no one said anything. They sat and talked for a while, and Harry smiled again when he saw Ron's arms come around Luna's waist, as naturally as if he'd always intended it. Eventually, of course, the boys' legs started to give out, requiring that the girls find seats of their own. Both Ginny and Luna had both been made fifth-year prefects, so Ron and Hermione herded them out to the head car for the prefects' meeting, which left Harry, Neville, and the Grangers in much more comfort for the remainder of the trip.

Surprisingly, they had a Malfoy free train ride to Hogwarts. He was on the train, that much they knew, but apparently word had gotten around that his favourite targets were sitting with adults, who were probably assumed to be teachers. Even Crabbe and Goyle were smart enough to know that starting your school year with detentions, even before the Welcoming Feast, was not the smartest way to deal with things.

As they climbed from the train, Harry pulled Ron aside. "Not to be embarrassing, Ron, but did you ...um ... react to having a pretty girl with a shapely rear sitting on your lap?"

Ron's face rivalled his hair. "Embarrassing as all hell, Harry. I'm glad she didn't say anything."

"Do you like her, Ron? As more than someone who can make you hard?"

"I won't deny that I liked the way she felt, Harry, but ... you know, I think I would like to know her better. She can act a bit barmy, but I like her, actually."

"You couldn't see her face, but she was crying tears of happiness when you ... reacted to her. I don't think she's ever had that before."

Ron bit his lower lip for a second, and then looked into the crowd, surprisingly finding Luna very quickly. "Oi, Luna!" he called.

"Oh, Ronald, I apologize for ... well, you understand," she began to say.

Ron blushed. "Um, I know how this sounds, given that, but ... um, I was wondering if ..."

"If you'd like to find a broom closet somewhere, just ask," she said somewhat sadly.

"No!" he said, somewhat angrily. "I'd like to know you better before we get *that* far." He scowled.

"Are you ... are you asking me for a relationship?" she asked in shock.

"Yeah, I guess I am. I was going to ask you to the first Hogsmeade weekend, to get the jump on anyone else who might ask you." They had walked in the general direction of the coaches, and Ron held the door for her as she climbed in. "Oh my, what a nice arse," he murmured, obviously unaware that he could be overheard.

"Please don't make fun of me, Ronald. You know that no one would ask me out. I'm Loony Luna Lovegood."

"Just 'cause they're too stupid to notice the beautiful girl in front of them ..." He trailed off as he realized that he had just admitted that in the coach in front of Luna, Ginny, Neville, Harry, and Hermione.

She scowled. "I asked you not to make fun of me," she said tersely. "I know I'm not beautiful, no matter what Harry might have said on the train." She sat, arms crossed tightly.

His eyebrows furrowed in some annoyance, and he walked over to her, looming unintentionally purely based upon his greater height. "What is it going to take to convince you that I happen to think you're dead sexy, and that I was too stupid to see that before?" He spun and put his hands in the air. "Oi!" he growled. "Women!" He sat down heavily just before the coach started to move, unconsciously mimicking Luna's body language. He muttered all the way up to the castle.

#####

Harry and the rest walked into the Great Hall, and he and Hermione were motioned to the head table by Dumbledore. "Harry;

Hermione. I wish for your permission concerning something. I wish to announce the wedding as at least a party, but if you desire, we can tell the school about the upcoming nuptials."

They looked at each other for a moment, and Hermione finally said, "We weren't exactly hiding our cover story for the *Daily Prophet's* purposes, so if you want to, we can even announce it for you."

"Expect a snide comment from Malfoy," Harry said with a small grin. "Shall we start book on how fast the rumours will begin that you're pregnant?" Dumbledore chuckled along with Hermione, and the two students walked back to the Gryffindor table.

Harry noticed, on the walk back, that there were a few girls giving Hermione the Evil Eye. He was surprised to find Susan Bones was one of them. He nudged Hermione and pointed that out. "What do you expect, sexy?" she whispered to him. "I've got the catch of the century, if not the millennium." She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

Draco Malfoy entered the hall, and upon seeing Harry and Hermione together, smiled his nasty smile and walked over. "So, making an honest woman of her, Potter? How are you going to deal with a child during classes, Mudblood?"

"Hah!" Harry laughed loud enough to draw everyone's attention to them. "I knew it! I knew Malfoy was unimaginative enough to fall back on that as an insult! Thank you, Draco! You just won me five Galleons!"

Draco stared at him in slack-jawed silence for a moment before assuming his normal icy demeanour again and stalking off to the Slytherin table.

"Who bet with you?" Parvati asked, puzzled.

"No one," Harry responded quietly. "But he was expecting to get a rise out of me for calling Hermione that vile name, so I decided to take a different tack. It'll be a while before he realizes that, and by then, the meal will have started. We're free of him for at least a little while, if only because his pride won't let him turn around to insult us again so soon."

"My fiancé is so smart," Hermione said in a voice that sounded as though she hadn't a thought in her head.

Harry laughed. "You sounded like your IQ dropped a hundred points, beautiful. Of course, that drops you into the merely genius range." He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

The doors opened, and a parade of children entered the Great Hall, and stood waiting to be sorted by the Sorting Hat. It sang another song exhorting unity between the houses, once again drawing a snort from Ron. A short time later, the first years had been sorted into the four houses, about as evenly amongst them as was possible. Dumbledore stood to make the usual school announcements.

"Welcome to Hogwarts! For those returning, I fear you shall have to listen to my speeches yet again." There was a sprinkling of laughter. "As always, there are certain areas off limits – for example, there is a reason that the Forbidden Forest has that name. The seventh floor southern wing is off limits until certain renovations have been completed. The forbidden items list can be found in Mister Filch's office, although it might be simplest to peruse the order form for Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes, since every item on that form is considered banned." He paused for student laughter as Ron and Ginny slapped their hands together with a cry of "Yes!"

As the laughter died, he continued. "It is my very great pleasure to announce that there will be a party held on the nineteenth of September to celebrate the wedding of Mister Harry Potter and Miss Hermione Granger. While weddings between students are excessively unusual and usually forbidden, there are certain protections against Voldemort that this wedding will cement, both for them, and for those here at the school. The couple has graciously permitted the entire student body to attend the reception to be held immediately following the ceremony."

He paused and stared into the student body, and down the head table. "There are those who will cry that this is favouritism on my part, and that I once again have bent the rules for the sake of Harry Potter. To this I say the following: Guilty as charged. I believe that

the previous five years have shown that the greatest menace that the wizarding world faces wishes a Hogwarts student harm, and even death. In my position as headmaster, it is my duty, and my pleasure to do what I can to prevent this harm from happening. If permitting a wedding between two students will somehow defeat Voldemort, and I believe that it will, then it is my intention to permit this wedding." He smiled.

Hermione stood. "By the way, folks – those who bet that the reason for the wedding is that I'm pregnant – well, you'll be paying out. I give Madame Pomfrey permission to tell the results of my most recent physical. Not pregnant; haven't ever been pregnant; and I have no intention of getting pregnant until *after* leaving Hogwarts." She sat down with a grin, looking at the shocked look on everyone's faces that she had been so terribly forward – so terribly unlike herself, as far as they knew.

Parvati leaned over to Lavender and said, not terribly quietly, "Last virgin I heard of being pregnant was two thousand years ago."

Harry and Hermione locked eyes for a moment, and with a grin and a twinkle in her eyes she nodded to him. He looked at Parvati and said, "Doesn't apply in Hermione's case, Parvati," in a conversational tone. He was rewarded with a look of utter disbelief from both Parvati and Lavender.

"Do you mean what I think you do?" Lavender squeaked.

"I won't be crude about it, but I have personal knowledge of her status. And that's *all* I'm saying on the subject." He turned back to Hermione, intentionally ignoring the murmur that ran immediately around the table. *They won't believe it, you know,* he thought with a laugh.

That's their problem, she responded. *I think that I'm going to be the girl I always wanted to be, Harry. I have a husband who knows that I'm a naturist and has no problems with it ...*

... having become one himself ...

Right. I'm going to be comfortable in our quarters, if you don't mind, and I'm going to answer the door in whatever I'm wearing at the time, and to hell with anyone else's attitudes.

Harry snorted. *You know that the girls are going to try to get me to answer the door, once it's discovered that our quarters are clothing optional.*

And the torture when they discover that you're a one woman man? Harry laughed out loud at that thought.

"Y'know mate, you used to unnerve people with that before; now you act as if you're actually carrying on conversations," Ron said with a grin.

"We are, Ron," Harry replied.

Up at the head table, Dumbledore allowed the murmurs to die down before continuing. "I would like to introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, Professor Demetrius Augustus." A tall, yet stocky man stood, and Harry was struck by the thought that he would not look out of place in a uniform, commanding a fleet of ships. He was given a smattering of applause, and sat again. "Also, we have two new students at the school, who are also in the unusual position of being teachers. Our previous Muggle Studies teacher, Professor Max Schnell, has moved on to a career in Quidditch as a coach for the Chudley Cannons." He paused for a fleeting "Yeah!" from Ron. "In his place, Professors Helen and Douglas Granger will be sharing the position."

Helen and Doug stood, and Helen spoke. "We're also available as counsellors for those who feel they need one. Believe me, we understand both sides of the equation – what it's like to have a child come off to this school, and then to be thrust into this world ourselves. If you need to talk, we're here." They sat back down.

"I have but a few more words to say before the meal may begin – wankel rotary engine." With that, he sat while food appeared on the tables.

They dug into the food, but Ron surprised them by not immediately shovelling a large amount of food into his mouth. Instead, he turned around to look over at the Ravenclaw table. Seeing Luna sitting there with no one willing to talk to her, he stood and walked over to her. "Hey, Luna?" he asked conversationally, but loud enough for everyone to hear, his face bright red.

"Yes, Ronald?" she asked, surprised.

"When we have our first Hogsmeade weekend, will you go with me? Heck, for that matter, when Harry and Hermione get married, will you dance with me at the reception?"

Tears sprung to her eyes. "Why are you doing this, Ronald?"

He leaned down, trying hard not to loom this time. "Because it took me all this time to realize that there was a very pretty girl sitting right over here at the Ravenclaw table, and that I wanted to know her better. I'm sure Malfoy can make a number of dumb jokes about my being slow on the uptake, but ... well, I'm stating, in front of the school, that I'm attracted to you, and I'd like to get to know you better. Wait, I already said that."

Luna was silent as she looked at him, and finally Cho Chang said, "Luna, I'd accept if I were you. If you've got a guy interested enough in you to ask you out on *two* dates in front of the whole school, then he's interested." As Luna remained speechless, Ron realized that he'd actually stunned her. Cho laughed. "She can correct this impression later, Ron, but I think I wouldn't be out of line to accept on her behalf. She'll do those with you. Right, Luna?" They looked to Luna, who was nodding with a smile on her face, tears flowing freely from her eyes as she bit her lower lip. For the first time in a long time, she looked like a normal girl – one who was terribly happy.

#####

Harry nestled into the bed next to Hermione. "I love you. Have I told you that recently?"

"It's been forever since you said it to me last, Harry. At least ten minutes." She smiled and pulled him into an embrace. "How did I ever manage to get so lucky?"

He kissed her. "I'm the lucky one. You have to look at me in the morning. I get the joy of waking up next to the most beautiful woman in existence."

"Who is she?" Hermione asked with a laugh. "I want to know the name of this cunning stunt you're waking up with, when you should be waking up with me."

Harry's jaw dropped at the Spoonerized profanity from his wife. Even though he had already learned about her different speech patterns when she was comfortable, she still shocked him at times. *I hope she always will.* He quickly replaced it with a look of anger, keeping his laughter inside. "I'll not have you insult my wife that way, thank you very much."

She laughed louder at his reaction. "The anger might have been believable if I hadn't been able to read your thoughts, Harry." She looked at him for a moment. "It still surprises me, though, to discover that you feel that way about me. You really would have gotten angry if someone else insulted me."

"Oh yes," he replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I wanted to put Draco through a wall at dinner, but I knew it would bother him more to get no reaction from me, or to get an unexpected reaction."

"Thank you for not hurting him, Harry. Not because I don't want him hurt, but because I don't want you getting in trouble because of him."

"With luck, having you in my head for real, instead of simply as my voice of conscience, should help that quite a bit."

"I've been your conscience?" she asked with surprise.

"Hadn't I mentioned that to you before?" When she shook her head no, he laughed quietly. "Somewhere last year I realized that I was always hearing your voice when I was arguing with myself about

something. My conscience was telling me just what you would, and in your voice."

She rolled over and nestled again him spoon-fashion. "I love you, Harry," she murmured, blushing. She couldn't find the words to explain how flattered she was. As he kissed her neck, she said, "Keep doing that, and we won't get to sleep." She felt his reaction press against her buttocks, and his teeth grazed her neck. She moaned quietly, and let his imagination take charge of the remainder of their night.

Chapter 17

Harry's Monday morning found him watching Hermione get dressed, if it could be called that, in knickers, a skirt that didn't even reach her rather cute knees, and a very soft short sleeved sweater. "No bra?" he asked her.

"You may adore them, but I'm really only a B-cup, Harry. I can often get away without a bra without worrying about having them reach my knees someday. Besides, I like dressing this way at home, and now I'm going to do it here." She smiled at him. "Don't worry, though. I like to wear one most of the time, if only to watch you drool as I take it off."

"Isn't that funny?" he smiled at her. "I know exactly what's under that cloth, and just how delectable the hidden skin is, but just watching you get undressed can make me so hard I feel I'm going to explode, even though I can be around you for hours with neither of us wearing anything more than a smile."

"Psychology, dear Harry. You may know, but it's hidden, and you want to see it. If I'm teasing you with the possibility, that makes it all the more tempting."

He snorted. "Can you imagine the reactions in the tower later when you remove the robes? The boys are going to be picking their jaws up off the floor and moving their books into their laps, and the girls will probably be gnashing their teeth."

"Harry, you're biased. I'm not that pretty. I know you think I am, but be honest." She huffed at him, putting her hands on her hips.

Harry watched her breasts bounce slightly before answering, with a slightly glazed look on his face. "I'll bet you that they will. If I win, I get one of those marvellous back-rubs of yours."

"And if I'm right?" she asked.

"What do you want?" he asked simply.

She thought for a moment. "How about you answer the door nude one day when we know it's Parvati or Lavender? They've ogled you forever, and now that you're mine"brvbar;."

"brvbar; you see no reason not to torture them with the knowledge," he laughed. She nodded with a wide grin on her face. "You are an evil, evil woman. Okay. Let's head on down to breakfast."

Breakfast was a raucous affair, as the first one of the school year always seemed to be. The Gryffindor table seemed to be staring at Ron Weasley as Harry and Hermione arrived. As they reached their seats near him, they understood why. He had his normal heaping plate full of breakfast in front of him, but was not bent over it shovelling food into his mouth in his usual style. Instead he was sitting upright and taking smaller bites, although the food seemed to be disappearing just as rapidly. When he saw them coming, he finished chewing and then swallowed. "Morning, you two. Sleep well?"

"Yes, Ron, thank you," Hermione replied. She paused for a time as she put food on her own plate, and then turned to him.

He grinned and answered the unspoken question. "Luna. I realized last night "ldquo; all on my own, mind you "ldquo; that the way I eat is unattractive. And that might drive the pretty girl I noticed last night away from me." He frowned. "I'm sorry, Hermione. As usual, that came out wrong."

"How?" she asked, puzzled. "You called Luna pretty. What's wrong with that?"

"I implied that you aren't, and I'll pound whatever's left after Harry's done with anyone else who tries to say you're not," he said firmly. He blinked. "Did that last even make any sense?"

She answered him by hugging him suddenly. "That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me, Ron. Congratulations, you have graduated to the emotional range of at least a tea cup. There is hope for you yet!" she laughed.

"Well, Potter," sneered a familiar voice, "it appears that you're simply not man enough for her. She's already branching out into bestiality."

Harry didn't even bother to turn and look to see who was behind him; he knew. He reached out and grabbed Ron by the shoulder to keep him from jumping to his feet in response. "Actually, you're reading it wrong, but that really doesn't surprise me."

"Oh, and I suppose you'll enlighten me as to why your girlfriend has her arms around Weasel?"

Harry grinned internally. *Moron.* "I don't see any reason why I should. I could tell you, I suppose, but I don't think you'd understand friendship any better than you'd understand *all* the uses for honey butter, fudge, and a really nice spreadable cheese. Now if you don't mind, I have a breakfast to eat." He kept his back casually turned on Draco, and started to dish up his breakfast, knowing that most of the table was looking at him.

"What the hell are you on about, Potter?" Draco asked, the confusion managing to outweigh the derision in his voice.

"If you have to ask, Draco, then you're still too young to know. Sorry." Harry said this without once turning to face Malfoy.

"He's bugfuck," muttered the Slytherin as he walked away from the table. "The fame has gone to his head, and he's utterly bugfuck." Breakfast continued amidst chuckles.

Given a total of twelve courses to be taught, and all N.E.W.T. level courses being double length, each course that Harry and Hermione had to take was given only once per week, which made him rather happy when he walked into his first Arithmancy class. Professor Amanda Vector was a severe looking woman, but he quickly discovered one of the reasons that Hermione loved the class. Professor Vector had a sense of humour that was rather dry, and she used it quite a lot in class. He actually found himself crying at one point, he was laughing so hard.

She gave difficult homework the first day back, but Harry was surprised to discover that he had picked up far more than he'd

thought during Hermione's tutoring periods. *Hmm, I guess taking off a piece of clothing for every right answer once we got into the tough stuff was definitely the right way to go. Given that body "brvbar; yow! Definitely made it worthwhile to get the answers right! I should be able to catch up with this and Ancient Runes this year.* He smiled and looked to his wife, who was blushing furiously as they walked toward their next class. "Whoops! Forgot that you could read that, Hermione. I was just wool-gathering, and musing about your delectable form."

"No accounting for taste," Malfoy announced as they walked by.

"Oh, she tastes just fine, Malfoy," Harry quipped as they continued past, ignoring the Slytherin provocateur. They heard a crash as someone apparently walked into one of the cubbyholes housing a suit of armour, which came crashing down.

Transfiguration was the next class, and Harry was once again performing far better than he previously had, not to mention far more powerfully. As they left class, hand in hand, he leaned over and kissed Hermione on the cheek. "Mister Potter!" came the sharp voice from within the room.

"Yes, ma'am?" he asked, puzzled.

"I must take five points for that public display of affection, I fear," she said, her mouth a thin line. Suddenly surprising him, she added, "I give you twenty points for being smart enough to know a good thing when you see it and courageous enough to show her your feelings."

He nodded. "Gotcha. No kissing in the halls." She smiled and nodded at him, and they headed off for lunch. Monday was his worst day, as far as classes were concerned, because he and Hermione had three that day. The next three days, luckily, only contained a single class each, and he was more than willing to wait until Thursday to see Professor Snape in a teacher/student capacity for two hours solid.

They enjoyed what seemed to be a leisurely lunch, not really caring as they talked, both vocally and telepathically, often switching in mid sentence, which was driving the rest of the people around them crazy,

hearing snippets of conversation. "Will you stop that?" Parvati finally asked. "Either talk out loud and let the rest of us listen in, or look in each others' eyes and talk that way. These little dribbles of conversation are annoying!" She smiled as she said it, to take some of the sting out of it. "You'd almost think you two were telepathic, the way you're carrying on!"

"We're practicing for being married," Hermione quipped, to distract Parvati from just how close her guess was. "Along with *"brvbar; other things."* She turned to Harry, and with a twinkle in her eyes asked, "Did you get the trampoline set up yet?"

"No room for it, love. The trapeze went up no problem, but I just can't make that blasted trampoline fit without tweaking the castle a bit, and it's already been nice enough to make our new rooms available. I guess I got over-exuberant when I bought it."

"That's all right, love. We can always shrink it." *Can you believe this? They're actually buying this!* she laughed to Harry.

Well, I'm the weird one, remember. I must have infected you with it when we decided to marry, he responded cheekily.

"What in blazes would you need a trampoline for?" Ron asked, puzzled.

Hermione's eyes twinkled as she asked, "Are you really sure you want that mental image, Ron?"

After a long pause, he laughed. "I guess not. Half of it, yeah, but I can do without Harry in the picture."

"I can't," Hermione purred, and smiled to herself as the boys in hearing range reacted.

Harry nudged her and pointed out the boys trying to not be noticeable as they adjusted their clothing. *Looks like someone's getting a back rub tonight* *"brvbar;* he thought with a slight taunt.

How about a naked one? she purred into his mind. *You know I know all the right spots to make you so hard you could drive nails.* He

reacted exactly as he knew she wanted, and was soon adjusting his own clothes.

Sounds good, 'cause then I'll roll over and tease you with it. You know you get just as horny as me now that we're linked.

Why do you think I want to do that to you? she laughed. "I love you, Harry," was all she said verbally.

They headed to Charms after lunch, Harry and Hermione heading out early, since they had a question about their link for Professor Flitwick. "Have you learned anything new about the link, sir?" Hermione asked.

"Oh my, yes!" he responded excitedly. "I'd first thought that perhaps the link was a simple telepathic one, but the studying I've done seems to point toward it being far more. I need to run another test or two, but I have every reason to believe that the spell that allowed your parents to become wizard and witch may well have soul bonded the two of you."

"Soul bonding?" Harry asked.

"Yes. It's a very rare situation where two individuals "brvbar; well, the poetic description is often "tilde;halves of one soul'. These individuals often would find each other no matter the adversity, and the bond they share is the most powerful one known to the magical world, which explains the astonishing increase in power that you both have experienced. In fact, that was what first put me upon the path of that thought process. You'll understand it was a totally unexpected effect of the ritual, and we'll have to do a lot of research before we can write this up for publication, of course." His eyes twinkled madly as he said, "Soul bonded couples, from what I understand, do everything that a couple can do together with great relish, because they both can feel the other's experiences. I understand that the sex is astonishing."

Hermione's eyes sparkled. "It is, sir. The bonding just made it more so." She blushed furiously as she said that.

Flitwick responded with a loud laugh. "Ah, Miss Granger, I was waiting for you to break from your shell."

"It just took the right man, sir," she said, taking Harry's hand and squeezing it.

"And the right woman to break me from mine, sir. I'm far more "brvbar; I don't know, I just feel better about the world." He paused. "Oh, sir? I had a thought. I have a very strong telepathic connection to her, and considering that I'm ma "brvbar; engaged to the smartest witch of our generation, the temptation to look in her mind for answers is just too great. I won't learn anything that way, sir. Is there a way of temporarily dampening the telepathic bond without endangering the soul bond, assuming that it is one?"

"Yes, there is," the diminutive professor said with a smile. "Twenty points to Gryffindor for your honesty." He held up his wand and said, "It's a surprisingly easy charm. Honestly, I was going to inform you that I was going to cast it upon you in class, and suggest that you use it before each of your other classes. It lasts roughly two to four hours, since the natural tendency to want the connection back will fight the charm. With the power that the two of you have, expect that it will tend toward the lower end of the time span." He showed them the charm, and Harry performed it.

As he felt the telepathic link muffle, he grinned and said, *Talk to you later, beloved.*

She shook. "That's disconcerting, in a way. I've gotten so used to him in my head that I feel "brvbar; well, I feel wrong."

"I understand, and I'll understand if your charm-work isn't up to its usual excellent standards, Miss Granger," Flitwick said with a smile. People began to filter into the room, so Harry and Hermione sat down. Hermione quickly shook off the odd feeling she had that Harry was a mile away, even though he was right next to her, and pleased the Charms professor by keeping to her standards of charm work.

When class was nearly over, Harry felt the link starting to return slowly, and a horrifying thought struck him. As the class ended, he walked up to the professor and asked him, "Is it possible to break a soul bonding?" He shuddered at the very concept.

Flitwick became very serious indeed, an expression not often seen on the diminutive Professor's face. "Very few know the spells to break a bonding of any sort, but yes, the spells exist to break a soul bonding. Pray that they are never cast upon either of you. The strength of the bond that increases your power is also your greatest weakness. The worst problem with a soul bonding is that once severed by death of one partner, the other invariably follows shortly thereafter. To sever a soul bonding while both are alive is tantamount to murder, since each person's magic will assume that the other is dead, for lack of a better way to describe the situation. Even if the partners can see and touch one another, magically and spiritually they cannot feel each other, and the shock can be immediately fatal to one or both."

"Can the severing spell be deflected?" Hermione asked with worry.

"Yes, luckily," Flitwick sighed. "If your reflexes are fast enough, you can deflect it with a simple *Protego*."

"Thank you, sir," Harry said. "Let us know when you want to perform the last of your tests. We'll be there." The Charms professor nodded and jumped down from his pedestal to grab some things for the next class he needed to teach, dismissing the couple with a gentle wave as they left the room.

Depositing their things in their suite, they decided on a walk around the lake. They stopped in a secluded area Harry had found once, where he'd discovered that people could walk right by him and not see him, if they weren't looking for him. He sat down with his back against a tree, and she sat with him, between his legs, her back against his chest. He put his arms around her and hugged her. "How long has it been since I told you that I love you?"

"Too long. Just before Charms," she mock-pouted.

"Well then," he said. Feeling the telepathic link back to full force, he simply let flow all the feelings he had for her, and he was rewarded with a gasp.

"Oh Harry," she sniffed. "It still surprises me how powerful your feelings for me are." She allowed him to read her the same way she had read him, and he hugged her tighter.

She felt him get mischievous, but before she could ask, he had released her from the hug. His right hand moved to her leg and began to stroke it, while the other found the bottom of her sweater. Lazily, both hands began to move toward their targets, the left sliding slowly and deliciously up her stomach, which was already quivering with anticipation of what was happening with his right hand, which had slid under the hem of her skirt.

When his hand reached her knickers, he paused. "Tell me what you want, Hermione."

"I want you to make me come," she breathed. "Tease me to an orgasm, Harry."

His finger slid to her clitoris, hard enough to be easily found through the material of her tiny silk thong. His left hand simultaneously found her breast and began to gently roll the nipple between thumb and forefinger. She moaned gently, and tried to push forward against his hand. It was only a short time into his teasing ministrations before she murmured, "Harry, be inside me. You're leaving the link open, and that's going to get messy." Without waiting, she disengaged from his hands, unconsciously letting out a moan of disappointment. A few moments later, after moving the material of the thong to the side, she happily had him ensconced within her, and he began to tease her again, adding gentle kisses and nibbles to her neck into the mixture. With the link open as wide as it was, they both rather quickly reached their destination.

As he came down, he continued to rain kisses gently upon her neck. "How do you do that to me?" he finally asked. "I look at you, and I lose all control."

"It's because I'm dressed, Harry, and you want to have access to what's underneath." He felt her blush. "I just look forward to the day we aren't using contraception anymore."

He paused in his ministrations. "That still surprises me to hear, Hermione. I know you love me "Idquo; I *feel* that you love me, but knowing that you *want* to go through that pain and suffering just to have my child "Idquo; it just "brvbar; you *know* I can't find the words."

"I love you," she said simply. "It's as simple as that, Harry. When we're finished with school, I intend to help you to continue the Potter line. Of course," she finished, "I want to get the process right, so I think it's going to take a *lot* of practice over the next two or three years." To punctuate her statement, she squeezed him tightly with her inner walls. "You're still inside me, Harry. Make me happy again." His hands came up to caress her breasts, and they fell into more gentle lovemaking.

As they eventually walked back up to the castle, Harry chuckled as he looked at his wife. "You're going to drive the boys in the tower crazy, love. You're trying to escape from your sweater."

"They're going to have to get used to it. I'm through being a fake person while I'm at school. Doing that for too long can make it true." She pulled him closer with the arm around his waist. "I'm in love with you, and you give me the strength to just be myself here at school. Thank you for being you, Harry."

"How could I be anyone else, beloved?" he chuckled. His hand slid easily into hers. "I begin to think that perhaps I was meant to survive this fight with Voldemort. Why else would such a wonderful woman and her equally as wonderful parents enter my life when I really needed them most? You back when I was eleven and needed friends, and your parents this year, when I needed family? Don't take this wrong, Hermione, but I love what your mother has done for me."

Hermione eyes sparkled as she fought with herself. Finally she said, "Please don't take this wrong, Harry, but Mum wasn't exactly complaining about what you did for her this summer."

He answered with a snort. "I still beat myself up over the situation sometimes, but I'm realizing that I'm the only one who doesn't forgive me. It was late at night, and I came across someone who can be mistaken for your older sister in extremely low light conditions. She looked like you, she moaned like you, and she "brvbar; well, it's

obvious that certain things are genetic. It wasn't until she spoke that I realized that I had just made love to your mother."

Hermione stopped and looked at him. "Are you aware that this is the first time you've called it what it was, Harry? Making love? You thought she was me, and so you loved her physically." She hugged him again, quickly. "Thank you, by the way, for making her happy. She thoroughly enjoyed it, from listening to her talk to Dad about it."

He shook his head. "I expect that I'll still have trouble dealing with it later on, but for this moment, in this place, I can accept it, because the woman who means everything to me still loves me." He pulled her close and kissed her tenderly, and kept his arm tight around her waist as they walked up the steps of the castle and through the wide archway.

"What some people will stoop to," drawled the familiar tones of Draco Malfoy, barely a second after they'd entered the front courtyard.

Irritated, Harry turned to Malfoy. "Are you following us around, Malfoy? Because this is the third time today you've gone out of your way to annoy me."

"Why would I be following you? I have better things to do with my time than follow you. I have a perfect right to be here, same as you."

"I don't know why you've been following me. Because you like my arse, maybe?"

Hermione giggled, and the pale boy's face became, if anything, even paler, except for two red spots that might have been a blush, or might have been rage, burning on his cheeks. "Come on love, let's just leave Malfoy like he wants to be "*brvbar; alone*."

Draco snarled at him, reaching for his wand. Harry's was out and aimed at him before Draco's was high enough to do any good. "You need new material, Malfoy. Your stable of insults are to call her a mudblood, Ron and Ginny poor, and either make fun of my choice of friends or be rather obvious that you support Voldemort. It gets old

after a while. Now, my fiancÃ©e and I are heading back inside. I would suggest that you put your wand away and go elsewhere."

"Are you threatening me, Potter?" he asked, a little too loudly.

"Actually, no. I'm trying to keep you from hexing either myself or my bride-to-be. If, you'll simply put the wand away, I can put mine away and we'll all be happy." He paused, aware of a presence in the courtyard in back of him. "Right, Professor Snape?"

"Put the wand away, Potter. That will be fifty points from Gryffindor for attempted duelling on the grounds, and a detention with me tonight during the dinner hour." Snape's smile could only be described as oily.

You'd think he was following us, too, just to get me into trouble, Harry grumbled over the link to Hermione. As Harry put his wand away, Malfoy's snapped up and he fired off a quick Stunning spell; Harry could see him out of the corner of his eye, but couldn't respond in time. Harry went to his knees and felt Hermione stagger slightly as it hit him, but they both fought off the effects rapidly, since it hadn't been vocalised. By the time they'd shaken it off, Snape was on his way back into the castle, and Malfoy was nowhere to be seen. Shaking his head, he turned and walked back into the castle, with Hermione right beside him. "I don't believe it!" she was muttering. "He heard what you said, and still gave you demerits and detention! And let Malfoy get away with a blatant attack! That man! That "brvbar; fucking bastard!" she finished with a hiss.

Harry stopped short and looked at her. "Damn, you *are* angry. Don't worry, though. I'm heading to the Headmaster's office right now. A Pensieve can be your friend, when used right." As they reached the gargoyle, Professor McGonagall stepped out from the stairway. "Ah, Professor! Just who I need to see."

"How may I help you, Mister Potter?" his head of household asked.

"I was just given a fifty point demerit and a detention tonight, and I believe it to be unfair. What is the process for challenging those decisions? I've never done it before, but I know there must be one."

"Professor Snape, am I right?" she asked, her brogue getting just a little thicker as her anger grew slightly. She turned to Hermione. "Were you a witness?" Hermione nodded. "Excellent. You were right to head in this direction. We would bring it before the Headmaster, so since we are already here" "brvbar;"

They headed up the stairwell to the office. "Mister Potter," said Albus Dumbledore genially. "Good heavens, I think this is a new record. Lemon drop?" Harry shook his head. "Well now, what brings you to my office, and so early in the year?"

"The need for adjudication, unfortunately. I just had points taken and a detention given, and I believe it to be unfairly. This was immediately followed by an attack on me which was completely ignored. I'm willing to put my memory of the incident into the Pensieve to show you what happened."

"Teach me how, and I'll do the same," Hermione said. She was quickly led through the process and showed what had happened from her point of view, drawing a scowl from Minerva McGonagall. She retrieved her memories and Harry then showed his own. Both sets of memories, of course, matched in all the critical details. When the show was done, Dumbledore looked at Harry and said, "You are aware that his treatment of you will be harsher for a time if I reverse this ruling and give the deserved penalty to Mr. Malfoy?"

"Are you recommending that I do not pursue, sir?" Harry asked somewhat incredulously.

"No, nor will you ever hear me suggest that sort of thing. If you feel this is worth the potential response from the Professor, then it will be reversed. I just wish to warn that, no matter how I seem to know everything at this school, that is merely an attitude that I have cultivated. I cannot always stop what he may do, and he is likely to use for his next detention a reason that resides within the rules, however close to the edge that reason may be."

"I have to face down Voldemort someday, sir. If I can't face down the Potions professor, then how do I have any hope of defeating Tom?"

Dumbledore smiled broadly. "Whether or not I have the right to be, Harry, I am proud of you for that decision." He paused and then said, "I am declaring his punishment nullified. I must work under the assumption that he did not see the important details, although your recollections do hint otherwise. I shall summon him to the office and inform him of the decision. Technically, Mr. Malfoy's actions are deserving of expulsion, but under the circumstances that would probably be a mistake."

Harry thought about it for a moment. "It's best to keep Malfoy where we can see him, isn't it, sir, instead of letting him make trouble where we can't see him?"

"Indeed. It is wise to keep your friends close, and your enemies closer, do you not agree? Therefore I shall give Mr. Malfoy the penalty that was to have been levied upon you "Idquo; fifty points from Slytherin, and a detention at the dinner hour to be served with Professor McGonagall "Idquo; I trust you can come up with something for the boy to do?"

"I do believe I need a thorough inventory of the supplies for the Transfiguration classes," mused the Scots witch. "I might be running short on mice and matchsticks. I shall make sure Mr. Malfoy is notified immediately."

"I believe that's everything, then," said Dumbledore, leaning back in his chair and steepling his fingers. "I need not remind you to use extra caution around both Professor Snape and Mr. Malfoy in the next week or so," he finished.

"Thank you, sir. I promise not to abuse this sort of thing, but this went beyond the pale. I had to say something."

"Understood. Again, I am proud of your decision." Harry nodded, but before he left, turned to Professor McGonagall. "I'm sorry for going around the chain of command, ma'am. That was ill-considered of me, and will not happen again."

"I appreciate that, Mister Potter," she replied with one of her rare smiles. "Now off with you. Enjoy the rest of your day."

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They re-entered Gryffindor Tower to find it surprisingly empty of people. Harry sat on the couch, and without a second thought Hermione sat on his lap and moved in for a kiss. “I love you so very much, Mrs. Potter,” he whispered to her, voice laden with emotion.

“I know, my beloved,” she replied, her own voice thick. She paused before saying with a slight chuckle, “You’re making me poetic, Harry. What is it about being in love that does that to a person?”

“Hormones,” he laughed. “Chemical imbalance.”

“Are you saying that I’m unbalanced?” she asked, her voice rising as if annoyed.

“You married me,” he replied. “That pretty well covers it, I’d say.”

“You!” she said with a laugh, and set to tickling him. He laughed and tried to escape, but was pinned to the sofa by his wife. Their squirming caused a different reaction in him, and he reached around her and pulled her close.

“I think you’d best stop, unless you want the Gryffindors to find out just how you affect me, Hermione. Your squirming on my lap”brvbar;” He left the comment unsaid, but she pressed herself a little against his erection. “Yeah. You do that to me so easily it’s not funny, love. It doesn’t help that being bonded to you shows me what a horny little thing you are.”

“You’re experiencing what you’ve done to me since I was twelve, Harry.” She gave him a sultry look. “Just be glad you got to me when you did. I’d have killed you if we waited until our twenties.”

“What a way to go,” he laughed, and kissed her gently.

#####

The rest of the school week went as they expected, especially in Potions. Making sure that the dampening spell was in effect before entering the classroom, he and Hermione sat down together. The

professor glided into his classroom and stated, "I will be rearranging the classroom this year. People are far too comfortable with their partners of the past five years, and it is time to prove that you actually earned the marks that your O.W.L.s state that you earned." His eyes falling quite obviously on Harry, he stated, "I can think of at least one student without the wits to have passed, yet whose O.W.L. score was Outstanding. While I understand the urge to correct a favoured student's work, gifting them with an unearned score is reprehensible."

Harry calmly ignored the professor's needling, and Snape continued. "I have assigned partners for each of you," he said, waving his wand at the blackboard, "as well as seating. You will rearrange yourselves accordingly. You have five minutes, which is four minutes more than you should need." He stepped away from the desks.

Harry was a little disturbed to discover himself working with Pansy Parkinson this year, but at least she was easily as disturbed by the situation as he was. Draco, on the other hand, had been assigned to work with Hermione. Harry kept his temper, knowing that Snape had assigned the layout the way he had because of the rivalries and hatred between them.

The students finally seated with their new partners, Professor Snape turned to face Harry directly. "Mister Potter, since you seem to have scored an Outstanding on your O.W.L. for this subject, perhaps you can use that much vaunted knowledge to tell me what happens if you put eye of newt, toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog together into a potion."

"Ah, getting Shakespearian on me, eh?" Harry chuckled. "Well, I'll ignore that the only one who seems to brag about my Potions knowledge is you, by denigrating it, and tell you that it would lead to an explosion that would likely require moving classes to a different classroom while this one was having the structural damage to the room repaired."

The professor's eyebrows rose at that answer, and turned to the board again, clearing off the seating diagram and replacing it with the potion that they would be working on that day. Two hours later, they

left the room, being stopped for a moment by Snape. "You may have whinged your way out of detention this time, Potter, but you will not always be so lucky. I will drive your arrogance from you before you leave this school."

"I'd expect nothing less of you, sir," Harry replied simply, and left the room.

Chapter 18

Harry and Hermione loved their first Friday back. They had made an effort earlier in the week to get homework done early, and had successfully done so. This left them the entire day to themselves. They were spending it working on the wedding.

"Okay, we've got the flowers dealt with; the invites are pretty much a bust, since everyone except the Weasley family are already here; and the rings are already chosen," Harry said. He looked up. "You'd said you wanted to use those rings, right?"

"Yes, they're lovely, and I think it's perfect to have something of your parents being part of the wedding. Other than you, of course," she finished with a laugh. She moved her shoulders oddly, and then grumbled. "I'm going to have to ask the elves what they use to wash the shirts. This one is itchy, and I don't remember it being that way before." She undid the shirt and pulled it off, laying it over the back of the sofa in the Gryffindor common room. As had been the case Monday, she wore nothing beneath it. "What else do we need to deal with?" she asked.

"Hmm," Harry mused. "Flowers, rings, invites, reception, gown — your gown! Do you have it?"

"Mum made sure we brought it when we came here. We've been dealing with Professor Flitwick and Professor Vector to do the last minute charms and fixes to make sure it fits perfectly. Make sure your shoes are on tight, because it'll blow your socks off otherwise."

"The most beautiful woman I know will be wearing it. Of course it will," he said simply and honestly.

She blushed demurely at his heartfelt comment. "So my clothes are taken care of. How about your suit, Harry?"

"Is this a Muggle style wedding, or a magical one?" he asked. "That decides which I need."

"Well, magic will certainly be a part of it, so if you want dress robes for the occasion, then I certainly won't complain."

"Good. I actually have a better idea on what kind of dress robe I might need than I do with Muggle suits, so I was going to get permission to go into Diagon Alley on Saturday or Sunday to get fitted for one. Who are your maid of honour and bridesmaids?"

"Ginny is maid of honour, and I asked Mum and Tonks to be my bridesmaids. I was so torn between Ginny and Mum —; it was Mum who insisted that I take Ginny as my maid of honour. We had a nice happy cry over it, and she took them to get gowns for the ceremony. She made sure that they were things that all three can wear again."

"What's the colour scheme, so that we can make sure we match? I'll need to take Remus and Ron with me, and probably Neville if he's willing to be one of my ushers."

Hermione rolled her eyes at Harry. "Honestly, love, why didn't you get all this straightened out before we came to school? It would have been easy to deal with then, and you wouldn't be rushing now."

"It's a guy thing, okay? I had other things on my mind. And you know what a teeny little mind it is, too —; I can only have a few things on it at one time. But I'm focusing now, all right? I'm even talking about colours with you. And speaking of colours..."

She waved her wand and a swatch of royal blue fabric flew into her hand. "This is the shade and material that the dresses are made from. Take it with you to the tailors, and we'll match perfectly."

"Probably should go black for them, with the trim being blue, then. How about me? I'm an idiot when it comes to this."

"No you're not, Harry. You're thinking quite clearly about what would look good. My dress is ecru, with silver and gold highlights about it."

"Ecru. Eggshell. Off-white. Paper. Why are there all these names for something that can just as easily be called off-white?" he

laughed. "I know what you mean, though. How about navy dress robes for me, then?"

She closed her eyes for a moment, and then smiled. "I think that would be magnificent, Harry." She snapped her fingers and waved her wand again. As something else came out of her bag, the portrait opened to let in a group of fifth, sixth and seventh year students. Dean led the group, and he stopped dead as he looked toward the couch. She looked up as the item hit her hand. "Hi guys. Harry and I will be out of your way on a few minutes. We're putting the last touches on the wedding."

"Um, Hermione?" Dean asked, his voice coming out as little more than a squeak.

"Hmm?" she asked, finally focusing on him completely.

"You're ... uh, you're ..." he stammered.

Harry looked at her for a long moment, puzzled, before Ginny giggled. "I can tell you guys are used to it. Hermione? Are you planning on giving the Gryffindor males stiffies all the time?"

"What are you talking about?" she asked, puzzled.

Neville walked over, bright red. "Does it bother you to be ... uh, topless ... uh, around a group of boys?"

She looked down. "Oh! Sorry. My shirt was bothering me, so I took it off. Ask Ginny or Ron how I reacted this summer, when their family happened to come over to my parents' house a little earlier than expected. Harry and I had been in the swimming pool in only our skin." She shrugged. "I'm a naturist. There's nothing automatically sexual about it. Yeah, if you're not used to it, you can end up reacting embarrassingly, but before the summer was out, Harry was walking around my parents' house in the nude as well, with no embarrassment at all."

Parvati giggled. "Forgive some of us girls if the thought of a nude Harry Potter makes us tingle interestingly."

Hermione laughed, and her eyes took on a humorous look. “The sight of it will do it even more, then.”

Dean cleared his throat. “Sorry, Hermione. Seeing a pretty girl with her shirt off is a fantasy most guys our age have. You’ve just made every guy here very happy,” he laughed, his blush darkening his skin.

She stood and walked over to him, kissing his cheek. “Thank you, Dean. I never thought of myself as pretty.”

“You are, even if none of us have ever told you before, and that’s our fault,” he said. “Harry’s a very lucky man.”

“Are you really more comfortable that way?” Ginny asked.

“To be honest, when Harry and I are in the apartment alone over there, I tend to strip to my skin. Nothing sexual —; I’m just far more comfortable nude.” She shrugged. “Sorry. I’ll keep it in there, as to not offend anyone.”

Harry was starting to scowl, but Lavender spoke up. “Honestly, we all dress the way we do down here because that’s the way it’s done. If you’re going to dress comfortably in your skin, then I reserve the right to walk around the common room in bra and knickers!” There was some applause that stopped suddenly when an “Oof!” erupted from Seamus.

“Err … that’s fine for us, and I’m sure the seventh-years aren’t going to object either,” said Neville, diffidently.

“Hell no!” came a cry from Simon Blackmore, one of the seventh years, followed by “Ow!” as his girlfriend whacked him on the arm.

“… but what about the little ones? I know I’d have melted right through the floor if I’d walked in here when I was eleven and seen, say, Winnie Milne sitting around without her shirt on.”

“Right, then. No scarring the lower classmen for life,” agreed Harry. After a momentary mental conversation with Hermione, he said, “How about this? We offer up the common room for our suites for those who want to study or schmooze wearing less than what they

normally would have to wear? Fifth years on up, and no coming in to just ogle — you're there because you want to be more comfortable, not because you want to make someone else less comfortable by staring. It's not exactly a small room itself, so we can accommodate a few people."

"Why?" Parvati asked simply.

"Because neither of us wants to make others uncomfortable by forcing them to experience something they don't want to. If you're not comfortable in your skin around others, then why should I force it on you by walking around out here nude?" he answered.

Ginny looked at Neville and winked before saying, "Don't worry your pretty head about that, Harry. Force away!" She looked to Neville and added, "Maybe we can get Neville to do the same."

Neville turned a bright pink, and looked to Ron in worry. Ron simply said, "You know the threats we Weasleys would give you, so do I really have to say them?"

"You'd be in line behind me," Neville said. "I have no intention of hurting her." He turned to Harry. "Thank you for saving her life in our second year, Harry."

Ginny's jaw dropped, and tears came to her eyes. "Neville?" she asked quietly.

He looked at her nervously. "I've been smitten with you for a long time, Ginny. I just gained the courage ... hell, it took you sitting on my lap on the Express to get me to even contemplate admitting it. For a Gryffindor, I'm a coward."

"Doesn't matter, Neville," Harry said. "It took Hermione and her mother ganging up on me to get me to admit it. I basically told her mother how I felt, and didn't know Hermione was behind me listening to the whole thing." He wasn't about to tell them how she had finally driven the point home. "Trust me on this — the women in our lives are far more courageous than us, and we simply don't deserve them. But for some reason, they chose us, and the smart man thanks his lucky stars every day of his life for that."

"Hear, hear!" Dean cried out. "Truer words were never spoken within my hearing." He looked to Hermione. "I'll understand if you say no, but would you ..."

"... pose for you someday?" she finished with a smile. "Certainly."

"You too, Harry," Dean said. "That is, if you're willing."

Harry laughed. "If I'm willing to walk around nude in front of my girlfriend's parents, I think I can pose for one of my good friends." He thought for a second, and the shirt slid through the door to the common room that he shared with Hermione, and then a royal blue sleeveless sweater top flew out into his waiting hands. "For when you're ready, love. *That* shirt shouldn't be scratchy."

"Admit it, you just like seeing me bra-less under these sweaters." He simply shrugged and put on a far-too-innocent look, and then walked over to Neville.

"Hey, Nev?" he asked, peeling Neville apart from the crowd. "Would you do me the very great honour of agreeing to be one of my groomsmen when it comes time for the wedding?"

"You're honoured?" Neville squeaked. "I'm the one who's honoured! If you want me there at your wedding, then I will be there."

"Good. I'm going to get permission from Dumbledore to go to Diagon Alley with you, Ron, and Remus Lupin either tomorrow or Sunday. We'll get our dress robes there."

#####

Monday started a new school week, and both Harry and Hermione were in fine form. The groom and his groomsmen had indeed gotten their dress robes that weekend, and Madame Malkin had agreed completely with the decisions that Harry had made concerning trim and such. Harry had overheard Ron and Neville muttering things to Remus about a "tilde;bachelor party' and just hoped they'd keep it to butterbeer. Remus the former professor he could trust to keep a lid on things, but Remus the former Marauder might very well aid and

abet Ron's wilder side, and Harry had no idea which Remus would dominate.

His classes went quite well, even without Hermione in his head, which pleased him to no end, since it truly meant that he had learned the material. He had gotten a chuckle from the class when he showed everyone the increased power he had at his command due to the link that he shared with Hermione. Conjuring a feather from the air, he performed the Banishing Charm on it, toward a stone wall that Professor Flitwick conjured. The resulting damage wasn't great, but no one had ever seen a feather chip stone before.

They were on their way toward the Great Hall for lunch when they were met by Draco and his omnipresent bodyguards. "Ah, here's the Potty and his little Mudblood. Amazing the depths that some people will stoop to just to get a little pussy, isn't it, boys?" he sneered.

"I'm sure you'd know all about that," Harry drawled back at him, "since you can't even find a woman that you don't have to pay. Your date is your hand when your allowance runs out."

"I'd watch my tongue if I were you," Draco started to threaten.

Hermione cut him off before he could finish the threat. "While it's certainly long enough for him to watch it, Draco, when it's out that far, he's usually doing something else with it," she said dreamily. "It's certainly in no position that it can be looked at." She sighed to match her tone of voice. "Shall we continue on toward lunch, Harry darling?" she asked, offering her hand to Harry.

"I'm surprised," Draco said as they walked away. "Given what I've heard, you've needed to expand out to the rest of Gryffindor Tower to keep satisfied, Granger. I could have told you Potter wasn't man enough."

Harry could feel her seething. Before she could speak, he said with amazement, "Why, Draco, I didn't know you paid such close attention to my ... manhood! I'm sorry to tell you, I just don't Seek for that team. You'll just have to live with the disappointment." Before Malfoy could stop sputtering, they had breezed out of hearing range of anything Malfoy might say.

"Thank you, Harry," she muttered. "He finally figured out which buttons of mine to push. I will not let him insult you."

"Let him, honey. It's unimportant. The Dursleys were far worse with what they said and did than anything he can come up with."

"But he's ... I don't want you insulted!"

"Yet you'll let him insult you to keep me from getting into trouble," he laughed as they entered the hall and sat at the Gryffindor table. "Make up your mind. He probably has things set up with Snivellus to come running whenever he tries to start something. Have you ever noticed how often Snape shows up at just the right moment, as far as Malfoy is concerned?" She nodded. "I'll admit, love, that this bond with you is the reason I can finally do what I should have been doing all these years — ignoring Malfoy. With you there, I can keep my calm enough. I want you proud of me. I've let you down so many times."

"Oh Harry," she sighed. "I am proud of you, especially after really learning what your life was like growing up. You came through that surprisingly sane, and a kinder and gentler person than you by rights should be."

"And somehow earned ... no, was granted the love of a woman who deserves far better than me. For something so magnificent, there is no earning it — it must be given."

"Oh Harry," she said with a throbbing voice, and leaned over to kiss him.

Harry thought of something and pulled out a piece of parchment and his quill. He wrote across the top "Uninvited", and after underlining the word, wrote "Draco Malfoy'. "Making a list of people we don't want at the wedding and reception, because they'll only make trouble." He thought for a moment before adding "Severus Snape'. "Not that he'd attend anyway, unless the headmaster forced him to, but to make it official..."

"Who else?" she asked.

"Basically, the idea I'm working with is to disallow the known troublemakers, and possibly anyone we hear spreading the rumours that Draco is starting. Make a point to them. Right"

She thought for a moment. "Hmm, yes, but make sure that it's overheard by someone we trust. No putting someone onto the list because someone says that so-and-so told them. Neville, or Ron, or Parvati, or one of the others have to have actually heard the person saying it." At his raised eyebrow for the inclusion of Parvati, she added, "Look, we may disagree on a few things, but she knows the gossip mill around here, as does Lavender." He nodded, and they continued with their lunch.

Monday through Wednesday went as expected, with a handful of people joining Harry and Hermione in their common room each of the nights. Ron had joined them on Monday, actually being quite good at ignoring Hermione's state of near nudity, but left the room quickly when Parvati came in and shucked off her robe, leaving her in her underwear. Parvati looked hurt until Harry pointed out that Ron was actually paying both her and Luna a very strong compliment. "You see, he's really sweet on Luna, and you looking like that is making him think things that could cause that relationship problems before it's really started."

Parvati smiled as she realized that Harry was telling the truth. "Someone needs to tell that girl that she's got one hell of a boyfriend there." She looked at Harry. "Aren't you afraid that Hermione's going to get jealous, given the way you're looking at me?"

"Why would I?" Hermione said without looking up. "I trust him. I know him. Certainly he thinks you're sexy —; I don't swing that way, as they say, and I think you're sexy." She finally looked up. "Besides, any frustrations you cause for him will most joyfully be worked out with me later on." She grinned at the dark skinned girl. Parvati blushed.

"I'm trying to get used to it, you know?" she finally said. "I do at home, sort of. Mom and Dad don't exactly complain if I walk around the house in only knickers. Padma does it too. But they're the only ones I do it around."

"Only do it if you're comfortable," Harry said, looking up from the book he'd looked down at for a moment. "If you're more comfortable in your robes, then wear your robes. If you decide that skin is comfortable, then do it." He saw her uncertain look, and melodramatically waggled his eyebrows at her. She laughed, and calmed down. By Wednesday she had finally achieved the courage to remove her brassiere for the last half hour of their study time.

#####

Thursday was their second Potions class, and Harry had a bad feeling about the day from the moment he woke up. He couldn't pin down the reason, just that he felt wrong somehow. This feeling translated through the link to Hermione, which made her edgy as well. "Harry, what is bothering you?"

"I wish I knew, love. It's driving me crazy, trying to figure it out." He shook his head and continued to pick at his breakfast.

Finally, it was time to head off to Potions, by far the least favourite class he had. The dampening spell was cast and they headed off, finding themselves surprised to walk into a classroom with the Slytherin contingent already seated and waiting for the beginning of class. This set Harry on edge even more.

Snape glided into the classroom in his usual manner and stood before the class. He began to teach the class, but was quickly interrupted by Hermione saying rather loudly, "Draco Malfoy, if you touch me like that again, they'll be regrowing your teeth and jaw."

"Are we having a problem, Miss Granger?" Snape asked with disgust. "Do you need your fiancÃ© to defend you?"

"Oh no," she said sweetly. "I was just informing your student that if he attempted to place his hand in my crotch again that he would be spending some quality time with Madame Pomfrey as she regrows body parts I was going to remove. Nothing more than that."

Snape eyebrows rose as he replied, "Well, given the proclivities of the Gryffindors this year, his misunderstanding of the situation, while

extremely badly timed, is completely understandable." He glared at Malfoy.

Harry grumbled. "So it's her fault for dressing that way in the privacy of our chambers where only our friends are allowed? That gives the ferret a right to molest my wife ... to be?" he added rapidly.

"School is not the place for such proclivities to be exercised, Mister Potter, and I have warned you before about your tone. Fifty points from Gryffindor for your extreme insolence. I shall also be talking to the headmaster about this little ... love nest you and Miss Granger are running in your quarters. Undoubtedly, you will be given the special treatment that you always have received since the day you were born, but the complaint must be lodged." He stalked forward to stand before Harry. "Open your mouth to respond and you will be receiving a detention." Harry stared daggers at him, which affected the Potions Master not at all. The man began to teach again, and the classroom slowly returned to normal.

The class continued as could be expected, with Snape making his usual digs at Gryffindor. Partway through class, Harry could feel a dull heat forming in his stomach, one that he rather enjoyed. He found it harder to concentrate, but it wasn't until he heard an erotic moan in his head that he shook himself free. He looked over to Hermione, who was nominally looking at Professor Snape, but there was the hint of a smile on her face. It was the smug look on Malfoy's face that made him realize that something was up.

Pointing his wand toward Hermione under the table, he murmured, "*Finite Incantatem*," and watched as both Hermione and Malfoy jumped in shock. She turned quickly on Malfoy and reached down before he could move, yanking the wand from his hand. "Despite your sociopathic little belief, Malfoy, I am not here for your sexual amusement," she snarled. "Do that again and I'll snap both your wands."

"Are we having a problem, Miss Granger?" Snape sneered. "Having trouble keeping boyfriends in line?"

"He was casting a spell on her for some sick purpose," Harry interjected. "I cast a *Finite* on her."

"And how would *you* know?" Snape asked, his voice clearly stating that he thought Harry's magical knowledge (or lack thereof) should have gotten him kicked out after his first year.

"I felt it through our link," he answered. "It was subtle, which is unusual for Malfoy, but it was there. I stopped him, I don't feel it anymore."

"So you and Miss Granger have a telepathic link, do you?" Snape scowled, his face starting to colour unflatteringly. "So not only am I forced to deal with a silly Gryffindor know-it-all who can't keep her legs closed, but I am forced to take you into my class so that you can cheat your way to a good grade based on *her* knowledge?" He pulled his wand and pointed it at Harry. "I will not have it, do you hear me? I will not stand for it! *Trennen Sie Bindung!*" An ugly vermillion beam shot out at Harry and struck him fully in the chest.

Chapter 19

Both the Grangers walked carefully into the staff break room on their first day of teaching and sat heavily in side-by-side chairs. “Rough day so far?” Minerva McGonagall asked sympathetically.

“First day teaching, ever,” Helen said, “and I feel like such a fraud. I have all these eager faces out there looking to Doug and me for information, and I am as lost in their world as they would be in mine.”

“That, Helen, is something you must get used to. As much as I will never truly understand the Muggle world, you will never completely understand so many things — things that are ingrained in us so deeply from childhood that we don’t even think about them.”

“You know, there probably ought to be a class for those of us who are Muggle born,” Doug said. “Wizard Studies, if you will. Muggle Studies is really for those mages who wish to understand the world you live alongside, so Wizard Studies should be for those students suddenly thrust into a world they knew nothing about before their eleventh birthday. Try to cover those things that a wizard *really* needs to know.”

Helen spoke up. “And Muggle Studies ought to be mandatory for all of your Wizard-born students, as Wizard Studies should be mandatory for Muggle-borns. As it is, the students who need Muggle Studies most are the ones least likely to take it. Half our class is actually Muggle-borns trying to figure out how Wizards see us. Our own daughter told us she took it for just that reason.”

“I’ll mention it to the Headmaster,” said McGonagall. “I have to say, however, that since the entire core teaching staff and all of the Board of Directors are themselves Wizard-born, and most of them purebloods, they’re not likely to see it as a priority.”

Helen sighed. “I’m not expecting the entire curriculum to be rearranged immediately. Just suggesting things to be considered in the future. What we could do right now, though, is get a new textbook. Not only is the current text one of the most soporific things I’ve come across since Russian literature...”

"You haven't read the History of Magic texts then, have you?" interrupted McGonagall with a smile.

"...but it's so out of date it isn't funny," said Helen firmly, refusing to be derailed from her chosen train of thought, although she smiled at Minerva's effort. "There is a full chapter in there on care and maintenance of your crossbow. Do you have any idea just how long it has been since any of us had to worry about a crossbow? There does not need to be an entire chapter on the care of crossbows and long and short bows! The only reason I'm going to use the book at *all* is as a history text, and that's because I don't want their parents to have wasted their money!"

Doug smiled, as did Minerva. "No, darling, tell us how you really feel," he chuckled, making Helen blush furiously. She was about to respond when Severus Snape slid into the room. "Minerva," he said conversationally before sliding his eyes across them and saying nothing.

Helen rolled her eyes and opened her mouth, but Doug spoke before she could. "Professor Snape, I have a question for you." His only response was a raised eyebrow that seemed to invite further speech, although just barely. "I understand that you have a problem with my daughter, and also with her fiancÃ©. We've only ever really heard Hermione's side of the equation, and there are always at least two sides to a situation. What's your side?"

Severus Snape looked long and hard at the man before opening his mouth. "To be honest, Mister Granger, I have a problem with anyone who aligns themselves so openly with an arrogant attention seeker such as your future son-in-law. He has been the talk of this castle from the moment that word was released that the Boy Who Lived was coming to Hogwarts. He has gotten away with things at this school that would have been cause for any other student's expulsion. To this day I am quite certain that he had a hand in the saving of a convicted murderer in his third year, although I have never quite solved that process. It involves a certain hippogriff as well, I know that much — one that was also slated for execution after mauling one of my students."

"Oh, you mean that scratch that Draco Malfoy had and milked for at least a month?" Minerva drawled quietly, her brogue thick.

"I somehow think that a gouge on the arm classifies as more than a simple scratch, Minerva," he responded in kind. "You yourself have pampered him from the beginning. Buying him a Nimbus so that he could be the first first-year allowed on a Quidditch team in far longer than I am aware of? You purchased that from your own funds, as I recall. His second year began with him receiving a slap on the wrist for an expulsion offence."

"Isn't that the year that an outside entity was attempting to keep him from the school?" Helen asked sweetly. "A house elf named Dobby, I believe? Knew that a Death Eater was attempting to get Hogwarts shut down, and was trying to keep Harry from being killed? While I understand that there was a problem with violating secrecy, he made a concerted effort to return to school that year. Unusual for a twelve year old, I'd think."

"Back to his admiring public is more likely," Snape grumbled.

"That was the year no one would speak to him because they thought he was the Heir of Slytherin, I believe," Minerva added softly.

"Ah, but he didn't know that the school would come to its senses for at least a little while," Snape responded. "Miss Weasley should be in Azkaban for her part in what happened."

"Please tell me that you did not just suggest sending an eleven year old child to prison," Minerva said, putting her head in her hands.

"She committed the crime, and yet got off, because the Golden Boy wanted to protect her. His third year was that foul experience with Sirius Black, and his inexplicable release. Again I say that Potter had a hand in it, although I have never quite figured how. His fourth year led to his lauding for being the fourth contestant in a three contestant game — a game in which a student died, and we must trust Potter's word as to the situation involved."

"A 'tilde;game' in which he was forced to participate in the first place, and at the end of which he was kidnapped into a deadly situation from which he only barely escaped."

"About which we have only his word."

"I believe there are methods for verifying these things, are there not? Potions, pensieves, and the like? As far as we understand it, not even a cursory investigation was made. The Muggle police would have made a far better job of it than your, what are they, Aurors? It's not the victim's fault that the investigation is totally inadequate."

Snape dismissed that with a wave of his hand. "And then there was last year, in which the boy took things into his own hands once again..."

"Because the Order, the adults who should have been protecting him, did such a bang-up job that he was attacked both at his family's home and at school. Oh yes, we know about the Order, and Voldemort," Doug said quietly after looking around the room, ensuring that it was only the four of them. Severus and Minerva both flinched.

"That is another reason I distrust your daughter. How many people has she endangered by telling about that specific thing? There are some in the Dark Lord's employ that have at least a passing knowledge of Muggles. How many people has that silly child told in the Muggle world?"

"Two," Helen said calmly. "Me, and Doug."

"What about her 'tilde;girlfriends'?" he sneered.

"She has none," Doug said sadly. "Being as intelligent as she is, that tended to scare off other girls her age. I understand a similar effect happened here. Certain other things didn't help any."

"My apologies," Snape said with sincerity, to everyone's surprise. "That does not change the fact that Potter is a known rule-breaker, and the headmaster of this school supports him in his violations. He has drawn others into his violations, and this nearly led

to the death of *your daughter*, because he could not quash his love of being the hero. It *did* lead to the death of his godfather."

"Excuse me?" Helen said. "You had a psychotic headmaster after Dumbledore was removed by the Ministry, one who was willing to cast Unforgivable curses on a student to get him to talk, and you had an even more psychotic Dark Lord reading Harry's thoughts, and feeding him false images. He had every reason to believe that his godfather, Sirius Black, was being tortured to death by Voldemort, and yet he was playing the hero when he made an effort to save him?"

"He was a fifteen year old boy — what hope would he have had against Death Eaters?" Snape responded.

"Apparently quite good," she responded. "All six of them are still alive, are they not?"

"Because the cavalry arrived," Snape retorted. "Without the Order and the Aurors arriving, I have no doubt that you would have been mourning the loss of your daughter, and she simply can not see that it is that glory hound's fault that she was hurt that badly. If she can not separate herself from his entourage, then she shall suffer the penalties of feeding his overweening ego."

She snorted. "This young man with the 'tilde;overweening ego' that you so rant about informed me that he should be thrown on the curb with the rest of the garbage for what his actions had done to Hermione. Were it not for the fact that he has forbidden us to explain his upbringing, I'd tell you just why you are so wrong about him. If you can lower yourself to deal with anything Muggle, then get your hands on the transcripts of the trial 'tilde;Crown vs. Vernon Dursley' and read it carefully. It will tell you everything you need to know about his home life."

Doug stood. "Shall we, love? Our classes are done for the day, and I think that I would like to retire to somewhere where the stench of hatred is not so strong. Good day, Minerva." With that, both Grangers exited the break room.

As they left, they could hear Minerva say, "That's a new record for you, Severus. Offending two teachers at once, and the first day of classes isn't even over."

#####

That was the last civil word between the Grangers and the Potions professor. They continued their first week dealing with other years — Tuesday had been especially interesting. That was when they had the sixth year students. Ron had chosen to take Muggle Studies this year, since it would actually be taught by people who had grown up in the Muggle world, not to mention being the parents of one of his best friends. The students were scattered amongst the houses, with even a handful of Slytherin taking it this year.

"Should be an easy grade," Pansy was saying to Blaise Zabini, who simply shrugged. "Can't see how it's all that important, since it's just Muggle things, but they always say 'Know your enemy'." She snorted, an unflattering sound. "What can they do, anyway? They're just the Mudblood's parents. Gonna give me a stern talking to?"

A voice from the front of the room said, "Accio bookbag!" Pansy's bag zipped toward the front of the room before the girl could grab it in an attempt to stop it. Doug Granger caught the bag easily and said, "Actually Miss Parkinson, I was thinking more along the lines of removing points from your House for disrespect to your Professors. Twenty should suffice for now." Pansy winced.

"Now, we have a few interesting statements from Miss Parkinson that should take up some time in this class. Excellent work, Miss Parkinson. Were it not for the fact that you were using a particularly offensive term, intended to be insulting, I might even have given points back in thanks."

"First off — I believe that we've answered the comment of 'what can they do'. *Wingardium Leviosa*." He floated the bookbag back to her. "Now, I think you can realize that it means that we can, in fact, perform spells, and are not as harmless as we might seem." This is just us in particular, though. We could also take your question to apply to all Muggles. 'What can they do?' Miss

Parkinson, you seem to believe that Wizards are superior to Muggles. May I ask why?"

"It's obvious. We can do magic. Muggles can't."

"So magic is inherently superior to technology?"

"Yes," Pansy said, as if it was obvious.

"Miss Parkinson, when was the last time a Wizard walked on the moon?"

"The moon? That's imposs..."

"It is not. The Americans have done it multiple times, using technology. Could a Wizard transport a vehicle to Mars and then receive pictures from it? Do Wizards even know what the surface of Mars looks like?"

"What possible use could something like that be?"

"There is always use in knowledge, Miss Parkinson. And while the goal itself may seem to be nonsensical, the benefits of the American space program to people the world over have been incalculable. Well ... to everybody except the Wizards, who don't seem to be availing themselves of it much."

Helen took over for a bit. "Let's talk medicine. Can a Wizard use the heart from a dead person and use it to replace the diseased heart of a living individual? Or a liver, or lungs, or other organs?"

Pansy just gaped at her.

"Fifty years ago, neither could Muggles, but now those feats are routine. Miss Parkinson, where does your food come from, your clothing?"

"All my clothes are handmade. But food ... I don't know where the kitchen gets it from. That's the elves' business, not mine."

"I checked. Most of the food consumed in this school is produced by local farmers — Muggles, all of them. Your clothing may be hand sewn, but the fabrics, the threads, all come from the Muggle world. And while handmade clothing is very posh, it also takes longer to make and is much more expensive. This limits how much of it you can have. I am willing to predict that if you compared the wardrobes of a pureblood student and a Muggle-born or Muggle-raised student, you'll find the pureblood may have nicer clothes, but far fewer of them. And machine-made clothing is at least a consistent quality, not depending on whether your seamstress had a headache the day she set the sleeves."

Doug Granger picked up the lecture again. "We'll be talking a lot more in the coming months about Muggle technology and products, and you'll get to try them out and make up your own minds. Right now I want to change the subject to something else. Something much more important, in the long run, than where you get your shoes. You made the pureblood comment, Miss Parkinson. This obviously means that there are a specific number of families that are considered to be pure. Am I correct so far?" She nodded warily. "How many of those families are you related to? I've learned, for example, that the Weasleys are related to a family called the Blacks, through marriage. As I understand things, this means that Mister Ronald Weasley and Mister Draco Malfoy are related. How many of your classmates are you related to, Miss Parkinson? Which one of them will you end up marrying to continue the family lines?" She looked shocked.

"Genetics is an interesting Muggle science," Helen interjected. The class whipped around to look at her. "It's used all the time in breeding animals. Most people forget that man is an animal too. Anyone out there in the classroom have anything to do with animal breeding?" A girl in Ravenclaw robes raised her hand. "Miss Thomson, isn't it?" At the girls nod, she continued. "What type of animals do you breed?"

"Dogs, ma'am ... uh, Professor. We breed Jack Russell Terriers."

"Calling me ma'am is all right. I'm certainly not going to take points for it. Now, what happens if you breed siblings?"

"Depends. Sometimes you get a stronger dog, but more often you get a trait you'd rather not have. It's one of the reasons that Dalmatians are almost always deaf, and more than a little psychotic. They're having to breed in other breeds of dog that are similar, just to increase the breeding population."

"Exactly. You get undesirable things happening when you breed animals with close relatives."

"Unless you cull," put in Miss Thomson.

"True. When breeding close siblings, strict culling is necessary. For those not familiar with the term, 'culling' means to remove individuals showing weaknesses or undesirable traits from the breeding line. With puppies, this means unfit ones are not permitted to breed. Humans, however, are permitted to breed no matter what weaknesses they have. And with an inbred line, those weaknesses multiply and build on each other." She paused. "Is there anyone not following this so far?"

A Hufflepuff boy raised his hand. "Yes, Mr. Cholmondeley?" she asked, pronouncing it Chumley.

"Are you saying that's the explanation for ... well, they matched my eldest brother with our cousin Hope. None of their children have survived more than a year."

"Birth defects and the like?" Helen asked. At his nod, she said, "I am sorry to hear about your brother and his wife — I am truly sorry for what they must be going through. But that is precisely what I am referring to. Cousin marriages are even worse than brother-sister marriages, as odd as that may seem. But to keep the bloodlines pure, that's what you need to do. And you heard what Miss Thomson said — they have to breed in other lines to keep the breed even remotely viable. To put it in terms that you can immediately relate to — if you're a pureblood, it's safe to say that there aren't too many more generations before you're literally marrying brothers and sisters, if you insist on keeping the blood pure. And if you're lucky, those children will merely be gibbering idiots."

"I am sorry to say, Mr. Cholmondeley, that the best hope for your brother and his wife would be for them to divorce and find other mates. Ones not related to them at all. And they should go to a Muggle geneticist to undergo screening to make sure there's not something nasty and unexpected between them and whoever they choose the next time. Yes, before you ask, this happens in Muggles, too. Any group isolated by cultural factors and forced to breed with a small number of related individuals will inevitably develop problems."

"It's been estimated that the minimum population of humans necessary to make a stable gene pool is around 150 or so young adults, assuming that they have large families and scrupulously keep consanguinity — degree of blood relationship — to a minimum. Now let's apply this to the Wizarding population of Britain — the population of Hogwarts, specifically. At the moment, there are, what, about ten students in each House per year? That's 280 individuals in a seven-year span, quite a reasonable number of potential mates. However, of those, about half are either Muggle-born or of mixed parentage. That cuts us down to 140 individuals right there. Miss Parkinson — no, I'll pick on someone else for a while — Mr. Weasley. Let's talk about family size."

"She picked an expert for that, all right," someone muttered. Ron flushed a dull red and Helen ignored the comment completely.

"I am familiar with your family, of course. You have seven siblings. Your parents had how many siblings each?"

"Mm. Dad has two brothers — Mum has a sister and a brother."

"Do any of them have children?"

"Uncle Marcus has two sons. Nothing on the Prewitt side of the family."

"Are they all married?"

"Yes."

"The replacement rate for humans is 2.3 children per couple. This allows to replace each parent and to make up for those who die without issue. The rate for your family, with five couples, is, let's see ... 1.8 children per couple. Even with the rather large number of children in your immediate family, your family is not replacing itself. Most of its genetic eggs are all in one basket, as well — your parents' heritage will survive — assuming you and your siblings have children — the others will be lost."

"Most pureblood families do not have many children, though, do they? Would you guess why not?"

"Well, there's inheritances. You don't want to split a family fortune, if there is one. So mostly they have kids until they get a son, then stop."

"So most families are fairly small?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"And that also leaves us with a preponderance of males over females, correct?" Helen could see students counting people in their heads and realizing that there were, in fact, more male pureblooded students than female ones. It was most obvious in the Slytherin and Ravenclaw groups, which had the largest number of purebloods. "It's inevitable that some of your males will go unmarried ... or be forced to marry outside of the group that is considered socially acceptable. Additionally, it's females that determine the reproductive rate. In our sample population of 140 individuals, only about 50 are females."

"It's been a long time since I took University biology classes," said Helen, "but I can tell from this rough analysis that the pureblood population is far too small to sustain itself as things stand. If you were content to have the population numbers stay as they are, each girl would have to have at least three children. If you want it to grow, four or more. And if you want it to be healthy, you'd have to rigorously prune your culls, which means you'd have to have even more children to make up for the ones removed from the bloodlines. If you do not do this ... in perhaps five generations, there will be no purebloods left." There was a long moment of silence. "If

you keep fighting among yourselves, and selecting spouses according to ideological purity," said Helen in a soft but intense voice, "perhaps three." She was gratified to see Ron and Pansy exchange looks. "The only other option is to bring in potential spouses from other population pools — I understand there's already a lot of mixing with families all over Europe. That might be enough to save you, though you'd have to increase family size regardless."

"But what about the mud—the Muggleborns and half-bloods? There are as many of them as us in the school. Won't they have the same problem?" asked one of the Ravenclaws.

"They do not restrict their gene pool. Remember, each Muggle-born comes from a different, and far more diverse, population. The likelihood of genetic abnormality is greatly reduced. Every Muggle-born that marries into that population strengthens it."

Doug interjected. "There's another side to the purity issue." He walked to his podium and looked at the students. "Grindelwald." They gasped. "I learned a little something about him recently, and I thought that those of you out there who were raised with a knowledge of the Muggle world would find it interesting. Adolf Hitler. No, Grindelwald was not Adolf Hitler, but he was known to the Muggle world as Reinhardt Heydrich, the father of The Final Solution." Several students paled, while the wizard raised children looked puzzled.

"During what we Muggles call World War II, Heydrich began, with the agreement of the Fuehrer, what was called the Final Solution. Those who disagreed with the Reich for any reason were imprisoned, and often sent to these camps. Interestingly, most of the groups chosen to be sent to the camps tended to be those with an enduring cultural tradition of magic or members of occult groups which mostly consisted of Muggles attempting to recreate what they remembered of magic from before the Wizarding and Muggle worlds were sundered. Jews, Catholics, Gypsies, Freemasons, Rosicrucians, even homosexuals — all targeted because of supposed mystical connections. Heydrich may very well have been attempting to selectively exterminate the groups of Muggles from which Muggleborn Wizards were likely to come, and which were most likely

to support those same Muggleborn children. It's sort of like attempting to eliminate all dogs in the world because you don't like the ones with spots. During the course of the war, over thirteen million people were killed in these camps. One of the worst crimes was being Jewish. Fully half of that thirteen million that I mentioned were Jewish. Think about that. That number is greater than the population of Scotland. More than *three* times the population of Ireland. The population of a country was destroyed, and for what? Some notion of purifying the blood. Think about that. Over six million people were murdered in the name of having pure blood. In order to maintain your genetic health, you need the Muggleborns. Reinhard Heydrich — Grindelwald — was attempting to destroy wizarding life in Europe — he would have doomed you all to destruction. If those who espouse those ideals continue to do so, and act upon them, then they *will* doom European wizardkind to extinction." He stepped back from the podium and looked out at the silent class. Even Pansy Parkinson had a disturbed look on her face. They let the class go early in order to allow them to think about what they had just learned, after telling them that they had a twelve inch parchment due next week — pick a war from the past and explore some of the atrocities performed, the reasons given for them and how they could have been prevented.

#####

The first week went well for them — word of their disciplinary measure against Pansy had been enough to point out that these new teachers did, in fact, have teeth. They shared a pleasant dinner with Harry and Hermione on Saturday, Harry talking with some enjoyment about the robes the gentlemen would be wearing at this wedding. With Ron's amused blessing, Harry had sprung on Remus the request that Lupin be his best man. "I told him that, at least in that way my parents could be there in some way," Harry said. "It's safe to say that none of us exactly had dry eyes." The conversation continued pleasantly, except for a short moment of nausea on Helen's part.

"Sorry," she said, exiting the water closet. "I think it's going to take a while for me to get used to the food you eat here. It's a tad bit richer than I'm used to eating, and my system simply does not want to

accept some of it. Not exactly going to complain, because it seems to be the more sugary foods that set it off.”

“Pity,” Harry said. “Some of the desserts here are to die for.” He blinked. “I do not believe that I just quoted Lavender Brown.” Hermione chuckled warmly at him. The night ended after curfew, but Doug escorted them back to their rooms to avoid any detention problems, and Harry made Doug promise to have Helen talk to Madame Pomfrey about her nausea, in case it was an allergy to something. “I love her, Doug,” he said simply, “and I don’t want to see anything happen. Get her checked out, okay?” Doug had grinned and nodded, even going so far as to hug them both before ushering them into their room.

The next week worked well, although the rumours about a secret orgy nest in Harry and Hermione’s rooms disturbed them. They had a feeling that the nastier of the comments were coming from the girlfriend of one of the seventh year student, who didn’t like her boyfriend noticing other women. There was no proof, however, so nothing could be done.

It was in their Thursday class, however, as they taught the fourth year students about music recording that their sense of foreboding took hold. They were nearing the end of class when a student exploded through the door. “Professors! You need to get to the Hospital Wing! Harry Potter just carried your daughter into the infirmary! She’s unconscious!”

Chapter 20

As the beam struck Harry, he felt such intense pain that he greyed out. It was only Hermione's scream that forced him back to consciousness. Steadying himself against the edge of his worktable, he could only watch as she fell forward. She stopped herself with her hands for a moment, but she was obviously weak. Her arms trembled and gave way as she slumped forward, passing out across the table.

Malfoy laughed and clapped his hands. "Oh, very nicely done. You should be on the stage, really!"

"Sit up, Miss Granger. Enough of your melodramatics," Snape snarled.

Harry stood and walked over to her, holding himself erect with the precision of a drunken man who knows he will fall if he is not careful.

"Sit down right now, Potter!"

Harry ignored the teacher and checked her carefully. *Pulse, yes, thank God. Breathing, yes. Skin, pale and clammy. Going into shock? Eyes half-open, mouth gaping.* Harry realized he was regaining control of his own body now, able to lean over without losing his balance.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor for disobeying a professor!"

Harry continued to ignore him, instead stepping around the worktable and picking her up. "I'm taking her to the hospital wing, Professor Snape," he said through clenched teeth. "You will not stop me."

"I don't think so, Potter," said Snape, levelling his wand at Harry again. "I'm used to the histrionics of students wishing to avoid class work. Put her down."

"Fuck you, Snape," Harry said, drawing a gasp from everyone in the room. "I am taking her to the hospital wing, and the only way you are going to stop me is by killing me. I've survived your lord and master

four times, I sure as hell can survive you." At that moment, no one in the room, possibly not even Snape, could gainsay that. Power was beginning to crackle around Harry like summer lightning, and a breeze from somewhere fluttered his and Hermione's robes while leaving Malfoy's motionless. Harry started to walk out from behind the table, but stopped as Hermione shivered once in his arms, and then went utterly limp. His eyes went wide, and he looked at the professor with murder in his eyes. "If she dies from this, Severus, make sure your will is up to date." Before the teacher could respond, the energy flared to levels that tingled along the skin of everyone in the room, and then with a flash and a BANG! Harry and Hermione were gone.

#####

He appeared in the Hospital Wing and screamed for Madame Pomfrey, his murderous calm gone as rapidly as he had changed their location. "Call Flitwick, McGonagall, and Dumbledore here! Snape just severed a soul bonding! Get Hermione's parents here too!" He set Hermione gently on a bed and turned to face the stunned woman. "Do it!" She shook her head and called Dumbledore, while Harry sat by the bed, holding Hermione's hand. "Oh, Hermione, please don't ... oh gods, what will I do if he's ..." He shuddered for a moment, and then sat up straighter, fighting off the despair that was trying to overcome him. "No, I can't think that way. You're in there, Hermione, and I won't imagine anything else being the case."

Pomfrey worked around him, doing her diagnostic things, waving her wand so that a variety of coloured glows formed around Hermione, each fading and being replaced by another almost immediately. She frowned and muttered to herself, and made new glows in colours that Harry wasn't even sure had names. After a few minutes of this, the Headmaster and his deputy stepped into the room, with Flitwick on their heels. They looked to Pomfrey first, but she just shook her head. "I don't know what's wrong with her, Headmaster. I've run every diagnostic test I could think of. It looks like she's in shock, and she's profoundly unconscious, but I can find no physical or even magical reason why she should be so."

"What happened, Harry?" Dumbledore asked.

"Snape happened," Harry said bitterly. "We walked into class and sat where he had assigned us. Hermione threatened to break Malfoy's wands when he attempted to put his hand between her legs, which earned Hermione a loss of points. Malfoy then started casting a very subtle spell that apparently causes the recipient to become strongly sexually aroused. When I started feeling it, even through the dampened link, I realized what was happening and cast a *Finite* on her, which made both her and Malfoy jump. When I explained that I could feel the spell through the bond, Snape bellowed something about not allowing me to cheat off a know-it-all slut, and cast some spell at me. It wasn't a Latin one; I don't know what it was. It sounded like he shouted 'training the bindoog', whatever the heck a bindoog is."

Flitwick's face went white. "Harry, did he say '*Trennen Sie Bindung*'?" the tiny professor asked, pronouncing the words very slowly.

Harry thought for a moment. "You know, Professor, I think that was it exactly."

Flitwick sat down hard on the hospital floor. "Harry, can you feel Hermione at all right now?"

Harry thought for a moment, knowing full well that Flitwick was being serious. He concentrated on Hermione with all he had. He had noticed one night while trying to fall asleep that if he concentrated, he could feel her heart beating, even if they weren't touching. He concentrated. He furrowed his brow and put all he had into it. He felt nothing. He was utterly alone inside his own head. Sorrowfully, he shook his head. "I can't feel her. She's just gone. I'm not sure I can even feel me right now."

"I was afraid of this," Flitwick said sadly before turning to Dumbledore. "Albus, two statements, neither of them negotiable. First, I am taking time from my classes, effective immediately, to study this problem. These two are still alive, and I have no intention of letting either of them die. I need to see if there is a way of reconnecting their soul bonding with at least one of them unconscious. Second, Severus will be punished for this, at the very

least losing his teaching position for a time, if not permanently, although at the moment my preference is to feed the bastard to the Dementors."

"Filius, you hate ... oh my God, it's that bad?" Minerva McGonagall gasped.

"Severus Snape may well have murdered both of these students, Minerva. Soul bondings are rare, although I found that I was less than surprised to discover that these two had managed one. Delighted, in fact, ignoring the chance to study an actual soul bond. I think I could see the beginnings of it during first year, after that troll incident. It's been growing all this time, and finally solidified this summer."

Harry blushed as he thought about that, but quickly remembered something. "She'll die if it's not able to be reconnected, won't she?" Flitwick nodded sadly. "What is the likelihood of being able to reconnect us?"

Flitwick looked pensive for a moment before saying, "Even being highly optimistic about it, I would say that there is only a one in four chance of success."

Harry looked up. "Okay. My work is now cut out for me. Kill Snape, and kill Voldemort. Maybe Malfoy for afters."

The swish of a cape announced a most opportune arrival. Snape must have practically sprinted from the dungeons, and arrived just in time to hear Harry's words. "Headmaster, I am aware how you coddle this boy, and let him get away with murder, but he has just threatened it. I demand that he be expelled!"

Dumbledore looked calmly at Snape. "From what Filius tells me, Severus, Harry would not be so much murdering you as meting out justice upon the murderer of himself and his ... intended."

"What?" came a shriek from the doorway, causing Snape to roll his eyes up into his head. "Hermione's dead?" Helen and Doug Granger had arrived.

Harry ran to meet Helen as she pushed past Snape and headed toward the bed that Hermione lay upon. “Not yet, Mum. According to Professor Flitwick, there’s a chance that the bond can be re-established, but the chances aren’t good. Snivellus over there decided that he didn’t like me protecting my wife from his pet pervert, and I let slip about the bond, so he cast a spell that Professor Flitwick seems to think is rather dire.”

He spun to face Snape. “You’re wrong, by the way. It was no threat.”

“You just informed the headmaster that you intend to kill me, and you think that it isn’t a threat?” Snape asked incredulously.

Harry’s look was cold. He began to stalk closer to the professor, unconsciously mimicking Snape’s own predatory way of moving. “A threat allows for the possibility that I won’t follow through. I promise you this, you snivelling waste of space – if I die from this, you will be preceding me. Even if I don’t die from this, you will precede me in death. You can infuriate me all you want, and insult me, and treat me like shit, just like those things that I’m unfortunately related to. I’m used to it. But the second that you listen to unfounded rumours and call my wife a prostitute, you step too far. You advocated allowing Malfoy raping my wife because you can’t stand that she’s far more intelligent than it is, and because you cannot wrap your feeble lump of grey matter around the concept that being comfortable with nudity doesn’t not necessarily mean that you fuck everything in sight! That may be the way that things were in your family, but she is well adjusted. I will not have you insulting my wife, and the only people I am willing to call my parents!” His hand shot up, and he backhanded the Potions master across the face. “Severus Snape, I formally challenge you to a duel of honour. I realize that you have none, but you can fake it, the same way that you fake working for the Order of the Phoenix while feeding information to Voldemort. You have insulted my wife and her family by extension. You have also performed a spell with a high degree of likelihood to cause both her death and mine. It is my right to challenge you to a duel, and if you do not accept, you will be admitting that you are wrong, and thereby opening yourself to further punishments.” He grinned, an expression that did not touch his eyes. “You see, I have been studying. I’m not nearly as ignorant of Wizarding customs as I used to be.”

Dumbledore attempted to regain control of the situation by reaching between Harry and Snape and trying to push them both back slightly, but neither moved, so he tried verbally. "Harry, I know you are in an extremely volatile mood right now. Surely you must see..."

Unexpectedly, Harry turned on Dumbledore. "Must? What 'must'? I've been listening to you tell me what I 'must' do for my entire life, and what has it gotten me? The Dursleys, and a cupboard, and *this*" he said, raising his left hand, where his agitation was causing the still-tender skin to flame red, "and *that*," he gestured at the unconscious girl on the bed. "You said before you considered me an adult. Now prove it and get out of my way. No one else is telling me what I must do anymore! There are only two things on my 'must do' list right now: dealing with Voldemort and dealing with *him*," he said, jerking his thumb at the Professor. "And Voldemort has just dropped way, way down in my priorities."

"Very well, Harry," said Dumbledore, "I'll not stand in your way. You are right; it is time, and past time, for you to take your destiny into your own hands."

Snape snorted, rubbing the red mark left on his cheek by Harry's blow. "I've no idea what you're babbling about, Potter, or why the Headmaster seems determined to indulge you in your idiocy yet again, but it doesn't matter. I refuse to duel with a child. And as for performing a spell that will kill the two of you? As delightful as such an idea may be to contemplate, I fail to see how severing a telepathic bond that you two reprobates are using in order to permit you to pass Potions could possibly threaten your lives. Cease your excessive drama and deal with the fact that you were caught in your attempts to cheat." He crossed his arms in front of his chest rather smugly.

He wasn't looking very smug a moment later, after Professor Flitwick had thrown him hard enough across the room that he actually made an indentation in the wall, even with a Cushioning Charm behind him. He was also firmly bound to the wall. The diminutive professor stalked over to Snape and snarled, "Severus, I will see your ability to teach revoked if it is the last thing I do. If I have my way, I will be there when you are Kissed. You have performed a dark spell that should be an Unforgiveable, and performed it upon a student no

less! Without bothering to do any investigation as to the situation or its possible effects! You did not sever merely a telepathic bond, which could have been severed through many less dangerous spells, but instead you severed a soul bonding! If I can't locate a method of re-establishing it, then you will have murdered two students!"

Severus was staring at the Charms teacher in shock. "A soul bond? Why was I not informed of this?" he finally asked.

Helen was in his face suddenly as she screamed, "It was none of your fucking business! You and your admitted hatred of my daughter and my son may well have doomed them, and you stand there and whine about not being informed? You would have simply used it against them in some way!" She pulled away from the bound professor and visibly calmed herself. "When Harry and Filius are through with you, I will be dealing with whatever is left. And you had best hope that one of them has killed you before I get to you. Your Dark Lord has *nothing* on a woman whose children have been hurt." She clasped her hands over her stomach in a manner that looked to Harry as if she were holding something, but he suspected that it was to prevent herself from attacking Snape.

Harry walked to directly in front of the professor. "What is your answer, Professor Snape? Do we duel, or do I simply wait for you in a darkened hallway some night and kill you like the Death Eater coward that you are?"

Snape turned a dark purple colour before responding. "If you are so eager to meet your doom, Potter, then I agree to your duel. I'm sure you know, from all your ... studying ... that a duel of honour cannot be to the death. Pity, that, because I would gladly remove the possibility of your reproducing with that ... creature on the bed with a simple wave of my wand."

"The sooner we do it, the better, Snivellus," Harry barked back. "If I could challenge you to the death, I would. Instead, I want it to the first injury that *requires* magic to repair it. Broken bones don't count, because the body can heal that – Muggles do it all the time."

"Fine. Choose your second, and we shall start the duel as soon as an area can be set up." He looked to the Charms professor. "If you

would not mind, professor, I need to prepare for the duel." Flitwick waved his wand and released Snape, who stalked from the room, vainly attempting to recover his injured dignity.

Harry returned to Hermione's side and sat beside her on the bed. He took one limp hand and cradled it between both of his, trying to restore its warmth with his own energy. "I love you, Hermione. I know you'll be disappointed in me for duelling, but he has to be taught that there are consequences." He felt tears building, and made no effort to hold them back. "You have to come back to me, Hermione. I love you too much to let you just slip away from me." The tears gently slipped from his eyes and struck her skin. "Come back to me, beloved." he said in a whisper.

Helen and Doug put their hands on his shoulders, and he looked up at them for a moment, before shaking his head to clear it. "Let me get out of the way for you two. She needs her family with her right now, and I have things to get ready for."

"Son, you're her family too, or don't you consider her being your wife as family?" Doug asked.

Harry smiled sadly. "I've been with her since it happened, Doug. Plus, I've known her for only five years; this starts our sixth. She's your *daughter*. I'm just the jerk who's put her life in danger yet again. Besides, I need to get ready for my duel against Snape. I may not be allowed to kill him on purpose, but I'm damned well going to cripple him for life." He stopped. "Will there ever be a time when my existence doesn't end up harming the people I care about?"

"Depends on how you define harming them, Harry," Helen said. "Life happens; the good with the bad. You're dealing with the bad right now, but think of this summer – how would you classify that?" She smiled.

"Think about this in return," he countered. "I was physically abused by the Dursleys, which led to me basically running away. I call you to help me, because everyone else I knew had stronger ties to the wizarding world, and right at that moment, I didn't dare contact anyone in the wizarding world, since I knew they'd send me back to

the Dursleys, since I was safest there. In the process of living with you, I managed to commit a legal form of rape with your daughter, which led to you effectively being forced to accept me as your son-in-law, which put you in even greater danger than before. The gods alone know how much I love your daughter, and love you two, but ... hell, that's not true. If I really loved you, I'd leave, making it very obvious to Voldemort where I was going. He'd chase me, and leave you alone."

He sighed, running his hands through his hair. "Think about it – she is lying in that bed, slowly dying, because of the good things that happened this summer. They lead inexorably toward that. And let's not talk about early August."

"A-heh," Helen said. "I disagree with your views on this summer, but that's not important. Harry, we *need* to talk about early August."

He stared at her for a moment, and then looked at his wrists. "You two are getting a divorce, aren't you?" he asked sadly. "Despite everything, it was too much for you." He looked into his hands, willing himself not to cry, at least.

Helen reached out and pulled his head up to look at her. "Actually, no. Doug and I are still carrying on like you and Hermione are. We're more in love now than before. But we need you to survive this duel with your teacher, and this problem with the soul bond, Harry." She paused for a moment as he looked quite puzzled. "You see, our little girls are going to need their daddy around."

Harry's face was a study in puzzlement. "But Doug is sterile, isn't he? Mumps, I think you said?"

"Yes, I am," Doug replied simply. "I fire blanks, as they say. Even Madame Pomfrey can't change that."

"But then ..." Harry began, but realization finally struck him, and his eyes opened wide. "Oh my God!" he breathed. "How can you stand to have me around?"

"Even though it was accidental, Harry, you've given us what we always wanted – more children," Doug said. "We love you, and we want our girls to know who their father is."

"They will," Harry said. "His name is Doug Granger."

"Harry," Doug began.

"Doug, I may be dead shortly, damn Severus Snape to the deepest pits of Hell. It's best that these girls are raised thinking that you are daddy. You can always tell them later. Now please, I need to think of what to do against my Potions professor."

Flitwick walked up to Harry. "Mister Potter? Might I be permitted to be your second? I wish to be there when you ... well, when you kick Severus's arse, I believe the Muggle saying is?"

"I would be honoured, sir," Harry blinked. "What else do I need to know about the duel?"

"No Unforgiveables, which is fairly obvious. Beyond that, pretty much anything goes. If you strike him with a *Reductor Curse*, then it means he wasn't good enough to stop it."

"Got it. And nobody's going to arrest me for it afterward?"

Flitwick nodded. "Your challenge was properly issued and witnessed. Whatever happens on the duelling field is fully supported by our law."

"Good. I assume the duel itself has to have witnesses as well."

"If I'm any judge, the entire school will turn out. You know the gossip has spread like wildfire by now. But at the very least, we will require those who witnessed the issuing of the challenge to witness its completion. That would be me, the Headmaster, Minerva, Doug and Helen of course, and Poppy. Poppy will provide medical support as needed."

"Oh, yes," said Harry softly. "If I have anything to say about it, Madame Pomfrey's services will definitely be needed down there."

"I understand. After what he's done today, I'd like him to leave in a coffin, personally," Professor Flitwick growled. Harry shook his head in further surprise at the tone in the professor's voice, and it finally hit home that more than just the Grangers cared for Hermione. He'd always known it, but it still surprised him.

"Stay safe yourself, Harry," Minerva McGonagall said. "I may be a stern task mistress, but I care for you no less than I care for Hermione." She kissed him on the cheek. He stood stunned and unmoving.

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Two hours later, Harry and Flitwick walked out to the Quidditch pitch, where the duel was being held. As predicted, the entire school population was in the stands, not quite believing what they had heard. McGonagall and Sprout had made a valiant effort to keep the younger students inside, believing the sight would not be an appropriate one for pre-teens. Dumbledore, however, told them to let the younger ones see if they wanted to. Their world was at war, he said sadly, and they would see what it brought sooner or later anyway. Accordingly, they had all turned out to take advantage of an unexpected afternoon free from classes and see the spectacle. Most of them had equipped themselves with red-and-gold Gryffindor Quidditch pennants, and were waving them frantically. Harry felt acid rise in his throat. This was not how he'd envisioned it. But it was what he had invoked, and he would see it through to the end.

Snape was standing alone near the duelling field as Harry and Flitwick approached. "Why, Severus," called Flitwick cheerily, "where is your second? Oh, dear, I suppose you had some difficulty finding one. I can't think of any staff members who'd back you on this. Not even Sybill," he said, nodding to the stands, where the garishly-clad divinations teacher was enthusiastically waving a Gryffindor banner, heedless of the number of times she'd predicted an early and gruesome death for Harry.

"I don't need a second to deal with the likes of Potter," sneered the Potions Master. "I've been studying the art of combat since before he

was even an idea in his father's perverted little mind. He'll soon learn that it's much more than striking heroic poses."

"I've fought for my life more times than I care to think about, Snape," said Harry, quietly. "Can you say the same? Terrorizing Muggles from behind a Death Eater mask doesn't count."

Before open hostilities broke out on the sidelines, the headmaster interrupted them. "Now that the ritual insults have been uttered, gentlemen, if you would?" He ushered both combatants onto the duelling field and cast *Sonorus* so that the crowd could hear everything clearly. "Ladies and gentlemen, if I may have your attention please? Thank you. We are gathered here today for a very unusual occasion. Regretfully, today you will be witnessing a duel between wizards," he announced to those watching. "You will see that it is not a simple, stylised fight – it is a brutal and bloody war between two people."

"As well it should be," Harry grumbled quietly, unaware that the entire crowd could hear him. "No one does that to Hermione and walks away without a scratch."

Dumbledore looked at him for a moment before continuing. "This duel is to the first injury that requires magic to allow it to heal. It will not be stopped for broken bones or severe cuts. It will, in fact, be possible to bleed to death without having the duel stopped." He looked at Harry and Snape. "Is there no possibility of working this out without bloodshed?"

Harry spoke. "Since he's not going to stop punishing me for being the son of his nemesis from *his* school days, and since Hermione, if she survives, is going to continue to take abuse for the dual crimes of falling in love with me and for being a Gryffindor, I think that your answer is no. I don't give a damn about me, but I'll go through anyone who harms her."

"As if you can, Potter," Snape snarled. "I have years of training on you."

"Most of it dark, Death Eater," Harry growled back at him. He could hear the gasp flow through the Quidditch pitch, and smiled to

himself. *That should screw up his chances of keeping his job.* He moved to his mark and stood loosely as Snape walked to his.

Dumbledore sighed. "Since this duel can not be prevented, I shall permit it to begin." He conjured a feather. "When this feather strikes the ground, the duel can begin." He pulled an object from his pocket, released the feather, and portkeyed away.

Harry kept an eye on the feather, which seemed to be taking an inordinately long time to reach the ground, but kept most of his attention on his opponent across the way. Finally, the feather stopped moving, and Harry whispered "*Protego*," as he put all his attention on the feather for only a moment. That seeming moment of inattention sparked Snape to movement, as he yelled "*Expelliarmus!*"

The spell bounced off Harry's shield. Harry returned volley with the same spell, and heard Snape's "*Protego!*" Harry's spell blew through Severus Snape's shield and threw him back about thirty feet as his wand shot past Harry's head fast enough to make a whistling noise. With Seeker's instincts, Harry followed the direction that the wand went, and was surprised to see it sticking into the wood of the stands, vibrating slightly.

Snape got to his feet, and Harry motioned toward his wand. "You might want to get it back before we continue the duel, Severus. I refuse to fight an unarmed man." Snape walked warily past him to the post, and put his hand around his wand and started to pull. Harry smiled and added, "Especially in a battle of wits." Snape's head snapped around and he glared at Harry for a moment before pulling at the wand again. His efforts, however, were futile, and the students in the stands above giggled as they craned their necks to see him tugging at the bit of ebony that protruded from the post.

After a minute or two of this, Harry murmured, "How about doing an *Engorgio* on the post? Should enlarge the hole enough to allow you to remove the wand. Then you can do a *Finite* and a *Reparo* on the post, and everything will be as good as new." Snape sneered at him, but a moment later, he had his wand in his hand and was stalking back to his mark. Harry cast a quick *Reparo* on the post just for the sake of safety.

Once back in place, Snape pointed his wand at Harry and barked out, “*Incarcerous!*” Harry leapt to the side, neatly avoiding the tangling ropes, and fired off his own *Incarcerous*, which caused massive cables to fire at the Potions professor. The teacher was barely able to avoid being caught by them, diving out of the way. As both sets of ropes disappeared, Snape fired off a spray of gravel from his wand, which followed Harry as he tried to get out of the way. “Nice,” Harry said. “Stings,” he added as he tried to escape the pelting of the little stones.

“Your pain is only beginning, Potter,” Snape snarled. “When I’m done with you, you’ll need others to do your school work for you. Of course, this won’t change your grades, since you already have others doing your work for you.” The stones began to get larger and a bit more painful as the spray continued, and Harry’s attempts at *Protego* did nothing to stop the spray. “Hope you enjoyed your little love nest while you had it, though. I’m certain Miss Granger won’t find you as appealing as she once did when you’re scarred and crippled for life. She’s just as shallow and fickle as any young girl is. Besides, I hear she’s already sleeping with the rest of Gryffindor.”

Harry stopped fighting the rain of stone, standing straight as a cold rage flowed through him. “*Reducto*,” he hissed, and the beam, far brighter and wider than usual, burst from his wand hard enough that it pushed him backwards. The barrage of rock and gravel suddenly ceased as the stones exploded in midair, and there was a loud shriek from inside the resulting cloud of dust.

“*Zephyrus*” whispered Harry, with a very small wave of his wand. A sudden gust of wind whirled the dust away, to reveal Snape, covered with blood and twitching weakly, on the ground. He was now missing his wand. And wand hand. And lower arm. And a good portion of his upper arm, not to mention a small chunk blown from his ribcage near the junction of arm and torso. There were gasps from the stands as the students saw what Harry had done. “Oh, that’s gotta hurt,” he murmured as he looked at the bleeding professor. He quickly threw a stasis around the professor and murmured, “*Accio* Snape’s wand.” When nothing happened, he looked around. The stand behind Snape had a rather large hole through the cloth hanging

that hid the stand supports from view. There was minor structural damage to that stand, so he cast another *Reparo* quickly.

He looked around for the Headmaster, and saw him approaching from the sidelines. Madame Pomfrey ran past them both and fell to her knees beside the wounded professor. "I think I win, Professor Dumbledore. Honour is satisfied. The law will deal with the rest of it. Now, if you don't mind, I need to go to the hospital wing and see how Hermione is doing." Without waiting to see whether or not Dumbledore heard him, he simply left, heading for the hospital wing, and no one even thought about stopping him.

Chapter 21

Harry reached the level of the hospital wing just in time to hear a bellowed, "Gerooff her, yeh soddin' pervert!" This was immediately followed with the sound of something impacting a wall - hard. Harry ran the rest of the distance to find Hagrid holding Draco Malfoy up against the wall, his feet kicking frantically a good two feet from the floor. The Slytherin's pants and an open pocket knife were on the floor next to Hermione's bed. The blanket was pulled down around her feet and her skirt was lifted, exposing the fact that Malfoy had sliced off her knickers.

Harry spun to face the Slytherin prefect, unaware that fire was dancing in his eyes. "Well, Malfoy, it looks like you didn't go to the duel, or else you'd have learned that you just put your life in your hands. Do you remember why I duelled your Head of Household? For insulting her. Just for insulting her. What you've done is far worse than that. Twice now. Oh by the way, you'll note that I came in here under my own power. Snape should be in here ..." As he spoke, Madame Pomfrey and the others appeared in the room via Portkey. They hurriedly levitated Snape's blood-covered body into a bed, and while Madame Pomfrey began to work on healing the professor, the others turned to look at Hagrid, Harry, and Malfoy. "Ah, there he is now." Harry looked smug and crossed his arms across his chest as Draco paled at the sight of the mangled Potions master.

An eyebrow rising dangerously high, Dumbledore asked, "Would it be too much, perhaps, to ask for an explanation as to why Mister Malfoy is being held against the wall in his current semi-disrobed state?" His voice did not sound amused.

"Li'l pervert was gonna do sumthin' to 'ermione!" Hagrid said. "I went ter the loo, and came back ter find 'im with 'is pants on the floor, and 'er skirt lifted! 'E didn't get a chance ter do anythin', though."

Harry nodded. "I heard Hagrid bellow and came running in after hearing something impact the wall. I assume it was the ferret I heard

impacting. Can I cover her up again, or do we have to wait for the Aurors or something? I don't know what the rules are for this ...”

“The use of pensieves makes investigation of a crime scene remarkably easy, Harry. Enough of us have seen this to provide an accurate recreation, so you may cover her now.” Harry did so, smoothing Hermione's skirt down and drawing the covers up protectively.

Dumbledore met Draco's eyes, and stared at him for a long moment. Draco tried to look haughty, but being half naked and in the spotlight, not to mention having been caught red-handed, did nothing for his ability to properly look affronted.

After a long moment of silence, Dumbledore turned and said, “It is within your rights to challenge Mister Malfoy to a duel, Harry. Given the results of your last one against a far more skilled opponent, I would request that you not, if only because you likely would kill him without even trying.” As Harry opened his mouth to respond, Dumbledore added quickly, “I ask this not because I feel he can be redeemed, but because I feel that his death would be too quick in such a case. And I don't think it should be on your hands in any case.” Rage flickered across the headmaster's features momentarily. It was an expression none of them had really seen before, and for a moment they caught a glimpse of the true power of the wizard who had killed Grindelwald. “It is bad enough what I have done to *you* in the past under the best of intentions, but for a student to attempt the rape of a fellow student is utterly reprehensible. The absolute minimum response for what he has attempted will be expulsion.”

Harry hadn't thought it possible for Draco to become any paler, but he was proven wrong. He decided to add to the discomfort of the Slytherin by simply adding, “I won't duel him, Professor. He'd be too easy. Besides, I got Snape. I think that this one should be handled by her parents.”

“What, the Muggles?” Malfoy gurgled, somehow managing to be contemptuous even in his disadvantaged state.

"The *Wizards*. At least temporarily, as powerful and as skilled as Hermione and I were at the end of last year. And a hell of a lot angrier. If you're given a choice, I'd take Doug. He'll just kill you. Helen will ... well, there's a reason that Kipling said that the female of the species is more deadly than the male." He smirked and turned to Hagrid. "He really never got anywhere with her?"

"Pants were hittin' the floor when I got back. No time ter do anythin'." Hagrid looked abashed. "I'm sorry, 'arry. I shoulda held it longer, or sumthin'. She almost ..."

Harry patted the man on the shoulder, having to reach up to do so. "Hagrid, don't beat yourself up over what might have happened. He never had the chance to rape her because you were here, so there's no worry, okay? Nothing to forgive." He walked over to Hermione and sat down next to her, smoothing her hair and stroking her cheek gently. His fingertips tingled oddly as he did, and he scowled. "Professor Dumbledore, can you tell if there's been a spell cast on her?"

As Dumbledore turned his attention to Hermione, Malfoy became, almost impossibly, even paler, and suddenly lost bladder control. The headmaster passed his wand over Hermione several times and spent a few moments inspecting the resulting auras before looking to the Charms professor and asking, "Filius? Double-check my findings, will you?"

Flitwick walked over to Hermione and passed his wand across her several times, murmuring as he did, finally, he looked up at the headmaster and said, "*Conceptigenus Puer*, right?" At Dumbledore's nod, Flitwick looked at Draco and said, "Well, Mister Malfoy, it seems as if you have earned space near your father. This spell proves not only attempted rape, but line theft. I wonder if you remember what the old penalties for that are?"

Malfoy apparently did. He fainted.

Hagrid grunted. "I guess I can let 'im down now, eh? My arm's gettin' a bit tired." He threw Malfoy carelessly onto a nearby bed, and Flitwick bound him there with magical cords.

Harry chuckled and said, "Now you have to figure out what to do with him. Whether he simply goes to Azkaban, or the Grangers are set upon him, is up to the rest of you. I'm going to stay here at Hermione's side until I simply can't anymore, for whatever reason."

Doug put his hand of Harry's shoulder. "What do you want done with him, Harry?" he asked quietly. "She *is* your wife."

"And your daughter before that. I got first crack at her tormentor on staff. I defer to the people who brought this wonderful woman into the world as to *his* disposition," he replied, poking a thumb at Malfoy. "If you want him dead, I will support it. If you merely want him in prison, I will support that as well. If you want him freed, well, then, I trust you, but I'd at least ask for your reasons."

"No worries about freeing him, Harry," Doug growled. "I'd not complain about getting a chance to kill the little bastard, but then he'd never learn from his mistakes."

"Not like he learns anything normally," Harry muttered. "Hasn't learned in five years not to annoy us on the train ride home. Doubt he's learned much of anything else."

Dumbledore stepped into the conversation. "I believe that, while we await the decision as to what we shall do with him, he should be placed under house arrest. We shall be requiring Aurors under any circumstance, but I would prefer not to release Mister Malfoy to them until we learn whether or not Narcissa Malfoy will perform as her husband did. If so, releasing him to the Ministry's care would be a very large mistake." He snapped his fingers and Dobby appeared immediately.

"Master Dumbledore! What can Dobby do for you?"

"We will be incarcerating Mister Malfoy in the dungeons. Can you see to it that one of the holding cells is prepared for an occupant?" Dobby nodded and disappeared. Looking at the confused expressions on Harry's and the Grangers' faces, he said, "This was a castle before it was a school, and it is over one thousand years old. It still has cells for holding prisoners. Hogwarts simply has not used them as such since before I was born."

Dobby reappeared quickly and said, "Dobby has prepared a room, sir. It is clean and dry, and even warm. Mister Malfoy will do well there." His eyes sparkled. "May Dobby be permitted to care for Mister Draco while he is down there?"

"I don't see why not," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. With that, Dobby took possession of Draco and disappeared with him.

"Were his crime not so egregious, I would almost feel sorry for him," Albus said with a sad smile.

"Why?" Helen asked.

Harry blinked for a moment, and then burst out laughing. "Oh my God! Draco has their old house elf taking care of him! The tables have been turned!" He fell forward gently as he laughed.

As the Grangers continued to look confused, Dumbledore explained. "House elves are bound to the service of a household." He raised a hand as Helen opened her mouth. "There is more to it than your daughter has yet discovered, but I agree with her that they are too often ill treated. Therein lies the beauty of this scene. Dobby was, at one time, the Malfoy family's most prized house elf. He was, however, so mistreated by the family that he attempted to keep Harry from school the year that the ... did Hermione ever tell you of the basilisk?"

"Yes. She was so worried for Ginny and Harry." Helen laughed. "Harry more than Ginny. I think if we'd taken the boy in that summer the way Hermione hinted that we should, they'd have been soul bonded for several years now."

"Excellent," the headmaster replied, eyes sparkling with mirth. "Dobby knew that something would happen, and that it was aimed at Harry, so he attempted to keep Harry from Hogwarts that year. To make a very long story short, Harry ended up freeing Dobby from his servitude to the Malfoy family. I know full well that, when Harry and Hermione leave school next year, I will be losing two fine elves from Hogwarts employ." He smiled at Harry.

"I'll have to tell her that once we wake her up," Harry said sadly. "Let her get used to having house elves around our property, once we find something." He paused for a moment. "Sir? You mentioned a spell that was cast on her. What was it?"

"The spell is *Conceptigenus Puer*. It guarantees that the woman it is cast upon will be impregnated and give birth to a male child. It is usually used to ensure the birth of a first-born son, for those who care about successions and such. The Malfoys have had an extraordinary string of first-born sons for a number of generations, so I am not surprised he knew of it. I am afraid, my boy, that you and Hermione will be waiting for some time to consummate the marriage, given her preference to avoid a child until she has finished Hogwarts."

"I take it that it can't be broken, and that it lasts until I make love to her next? Or until *somebody* has sex with her, anyway?" At the headmaster's nod, he tilted his head in thought. "Sneaky little bastard, isn't he?"

"What do you mean?" Helen asked.

"We swore that she wasn't pregnant. So, he comes in here, casts that, and then rapes her. If he were smart enough to clean up after himself, he might even get away with it. The dates are close enough that it looks to the general public like we're liars, or too stupid to count days. Also, when the child comes out with light brown or blond hair, possibly with the same grey eyes? It's obvious that she was cheating on me, so it would be equally obvious that I'd have to dump her, and yet, since we're married, the child is officially my heir. So he would be breaking up the marriage and forcing me to accept a Malfoy as an heir. This was his thought process, I'll bet. Of course, he doesn't know that I know Hermione well enough to know that it would *have* to be rape to get her to open her legs for him. And any child she bore in her body I would love. It's not the genes that makes the child bad, it's the upbringing. But what's this line theft thing? It must be bad, the way Draco reacted."

"To the pureblood families, lineage is everything and the firstborn son inherits almost everything by primogeniture. The old laws reflect this," said Dumbledore. "Line theft occurs when someone does

exactly what you described, to deliberately ‘steal’ an inheritance by making sure the firstborn is misbegotten. Theft of a line was considered a crime against the whole family, and the Wizarding community at large, where rape was merely a crime against the woman and her husband. The penalties are correspondingly severe.” The elderly wizard laughed softly. “At the very least, Harry, Draco stands to forfeit one-quarter of the Malfoy fortune to you merely for the attempt. It would have been one-half, and eventual inheritance of the whole by the offspring, had he succeeded, as he would have been forced to accept the child as his heir as well. I cannot think that that was his intent.”

“No, I don’t think he was thinking that far ahead. Then again, he never does. He certainly wouldn’t have wanted to destroy his family’s whole ‘pureblood’ thing by having *his* heir borne by a Muggle-born witch. One-quarter of his fortune, eh? Daddy’s not going to be pleased about that. Not sure I want it, though. I have enough. And Hermione’s the injured party anyway.”

“Then let her decide. Or give it to charity. If you don’t do something with it, it will revert to the Ministry’s general funds, and I’m sure Minister Fudge would be happy to give you an Order of Merlin or something for the donation.”

“Fudge? Can’t have that, either. I’ll think of something, then.” Harry shook his head, and wavered a little in the chair. “Whoo, I think this has taken quite a lot out of me. I am feeling rather tired. Anyone mind if I take a little nap?”

Flitwick looked a little uncomfortable as he said, “Actually, sleeping may be a bad idea, Harry. It could be the beginning of you slipping into a coma. One of you has to be conscious if there’s to be any hope of re-establishing the bond.”

“What can I do, then? How long do you think it will take you to find an answer, if there is one?”

“I don’t know. That’s the problem.” The Charms professor shrugged apologetically.

"So if it takes you a week, I'm supposed to remain awake for one hundred and sixty eight hours? What if it's ten days? Two hundred forty hours without sleep? Might as well just kill me now!" He shook his head. "I'm sorry, professor. Stress, adrenalin, and worry. I understand your worries, but this feels like a normal tiredness to me, not the 'I really need to heal but I'm too stupid to listen to my body' type that I'm all too familiar with. I think it's just fatigue."

Doug Granger spoke up. "How about this? We put Harry in bed with Hermione - as much contact as possible can't be bad in this situation - and Helen and I keep an eye on our children. If it looks as if Harry is slipping into something other than a normal sleep, we *Ennervate* him and get the rest of you running here. Does that address your worries, Filius?"

"Yes it does," the professor replied. "That should do nicely." He looked to Harry. "This might embarrass you to hear me suggest it, but your father-in-law is correct. In fact, it might do well for you both to be undressed. Skin to skin contact can't possibly hurt in this situation. We'll move the bed into a side room to give you some privacy."

Harry nodded. "Makes sense." He looked to her parents. "You lift and I strip her, or vice versa?"

Helen smiled. "Given the power you were showing out there, Harry, it might be an idea to let Doug lift and me strip her. You might imbed her in the ceiling by accident." She laughed at the statement, and Harry smiled.

"True. She might hurt me after she wakes up if I did that. 'Harry, could you explain why I'm upside down in the ceiling of the Hospital Wing up to my shoulders?' Don't think she'd like my explanation." He chuckled, which was followed by a prodigious yawn.

While Doug and Helen were seeing to the arrangements, Madam Pomfrey approached Harry and touched him gently on the arm, directing his attention to the other occupied bed. "If you don't mind, Harry, I've got Professor Snape stabilized so he's in no danger of bleeding to death or dying of shock. But if I'm going to do any serious

repair work, that stasis you cast needs to be removed - I can't get through it or take it off."

Harry looked over to the bed. Snape's black robes had been cut away from his body and the blood cleaned off, exposing a pasty-white, poorly muscled chest above the sheet drawn up to his hips for modesty. Harry hadn't thought it possible for the man to be uglier than usual, but in this condition, he was. Madam Pomfrey had trimmed torn flesh and bone splinters away from the gaping wound at his lower left side and finished removing the mangled left arm cleanly at the shoulder. Both wounds were shimmering with spell protections to prevent bleeding and infection, but were otherwise unbandaged. Harry's stomach lurched at the sight of what he'd done - it was different looking at it now than it had been in the heat of the duel - but he felt no regret for it. Snape had got what he deserved. "It won't hurt him to stay that way, though?"

"No, it won't, but -"

"Then I'm sorry, but I won't take it off. Hermione and I are going to need peace for a while, and we won't get that if he's awake. Let him play Sleeping Beauty - or Sleeping Ugly in his case - until all this is over and I have the energy to deal with him." The tone of his voice made it very clear that his mind was made up.

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips in disapproval, but Dumbledore shook his head slightly at her. "Let it be for now, Poppy. The boy is right, no harm will be done if Severus remains in stasis for a time."

Hermione's bed was shifted to a small private room and another bed placed alongside. Dumbledore effortlessly transfigured the two beds into one double, and while Doug turned back the covers, Helen rapidly undressed her daughter. Harry stripped and climbed in under the blankets to hold Hermione in his arms as best he could. "Oh love, please come back to me. I love you too much to lose you now." He felt tears building in his eyes, but he quashed them ruthlessly. He gently kissed her cheek and drifted off to sleep.

He was awakened an unguessable time later to the frantic but upbeat whisperings of Flitwick and Hermione's parents. It was below the

level of understanding, but loud enough to capture his attention. He groaned quietly and opened his eyes. "How long have I been out?"

"It's Friday morning, Harry," Doug said gently. "You slept clear through the rest of Thursday. It's about ten o'clock."

Harry dragged himself out of the bed long enough to attend to necessary functions. When he returned, he looked at Hermione, still lying still on the bed. "I finally understand that phrase, and just how disturbing it is." He kissed her cheek and looked at the others before explaining. "Still as the grave."

Flitwick nodded sagely, and then looked hopefully at Harry. "Harry, I may have found a solution, but it's likely to be a bit distasteful for you."

Harry's looked was guarded. "What is this distasteful solution?"

"You know about fairy tales, correct? And how the versions that most people know these days have been made much gentler than the originals?"

Harry looked at his teacher. A part of him wanted to be just like fifth year and rail and rant over not being told immediately, but the part of him that was rapidly becoming an adult told him that Flitwick was uncertain about his reaction, which was why he was approaching it that way. "Which fairy tale, sir?"

"Sleeping Beauty," the teacher replied with a wince. "It was something you said about Severus that gave me the idea, as a matter of fact."

Harry unfocused and began to think, speaking as he did. "Sixteen year old girl; deep sleep; prince kisses her awake. But that's the clean version. Hmm, sixteen year old girl, deep sleep; what in hell did the prince do to her?" He scowled, realizing that he'd never heard of the original version's outcome.

Helen spoke quietly. "The prince was something of a rapist. He finds a sleeping girl and decides to have a little fun. She gives birth nine

months later. One of her babies sucks out the splinter that left her asleep and she wakes up."

Flitwick picked up. "The old tales often have cores of truth, especially where magic is concerned. In the old days, there was not such a separation between our world and the Muggle world, and many Muggle stories contain magical concepts. This sounds like an extremely corrupted version of one of the methods of repairing a damaged soul bonding. Harry, the likelihood of your bond being repaired was roughly twenty-five percent before Malfoy entered the picture. The magic he cast upon her is likely, if nothing else, to have raised the likelihood of your repairing the bond to fifty percent or perhaps more. The magic behind *Conceptigenus Puer* prefers to keep the baby safe." He shuddered. "We should all give thanks to Hagrid for stopping Mister Malfoy from completing his plans. The possibility is there that she could have reforged a soul bonding, but with him."

"She'd have ... oh boy, I'm glad it didn't happen, not only because it means she can still bond with me, but because she'd likely have killed herself rather than remain telepathically linked to him."

"Yes, well, there is that." Flitwick consulted a scroll of complex Arithmantic equations which meant absolutely nothing to Harry - yet - but he was quite interested in looking at them later, after Hermione was back. "Actually, with your increased magical strength, the chance of re-establishing the bond is even greater, but I couldn't say how much greater. I don't even know why your strength is so great at the moment. Although it should have dropped when the bond was severed, it seems to have increased. But we don't even know why it increased after the ritual for Doug and Helen, so I can't even guess at it now. We can just be thankful that it is so."

It suddenly struck Harry what was required. "So I effectively have to rape and impregnate my own wife in hopes of reforging the bond between our souls, if I'm understanding you properly."

"Is it really rape, son?" Helen asked. "From those squeals we heard during the summer, I think it's fairly obvious that she enjoyed your ministrations."

"That may be the case, but she has absolutely no say in it this time. I decide to do this to her, and she gets to wake up and find out that she's carrying my son. I'm glad I relinquished my claim on that son of a bitch, because I'd kill him very, very slowly for putting her through this."

Doug put his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry, look at it this way. Do you think Hermione would rather wake up to find herself being made love to by her husband, or having Draco Malfoy atop her? You needn't answer that, by the way - we all know the answer."

"Still, it feels like rape to me. She doesn't get a say in the matter until after it's too late. Are you sure there's no other way?"

Flitwick rolled up his scroll again and sighed. "There may be, but I don't know how long it will take to find it, or whether or not it will be possible with her comatose. Most of the other ways of establishing a soul bond or healing a damaged one are rather complex. This one has the advantage of being fast, simple, and possible. What's more, if you try it and it doesn't work, it won't automatically prevent any other process from working, so we can always try something else."

Harry nodded slowly. "All right, then. I'll do it, but I'll tell you this - if she blasts me across the room for it, I want you all to promise that you will let me heal normally, not through magical means."

Helen grinned at him. "I agree, Harry. Of course, none of us can make that decision for Hermione, so you'd have to convince her not to heal you after she's awake. And you know how likely that is." She walked over and pulled Harry into a hug. "We love you, Harry, and we know that this is being done to save her life. She'll forgive you. Hell, she may insist on more, since she'll insist that she missed the beginning, so she'll want a replay of the events that led to her pregnancy. Expect that you'll be spending a lot of time ... ahem ... 'strengthening the soul bond', if you catch my meaning." She whispered in his ear. "And given your skills with that particular activity, I can understand her feelings."

His eyes widened. "Must you remind me of that?" he asked, managing to blush with a pained look on his face.

"I can't help it, Harry," she said, putting her hands to her stomach. "We'll always have a reminder of that night."

"I am so torn about that, you know. There's the part of me that absolutely hates that I did that. I still feel as if I cheated on Hermione." He raised a hand to stop her. "I know, I know. But this is the emotional side talking, remember? It's stupid that way. But then there's the fact that doing what I did means that you and Doug get the one thing you've wanted more than anything - to give Hermione a sibling. I'm torn as to how to react."

"Simple," Doug responded. "You make love to our daughter, waking her up and reconnecting the soul bond between the two of you. Hermione will give birth a month or so after Helen, and we all go on to be deliriously happy. As I said - simple."

"Well you help explain to her that ..."

"Harry, what you are doing is not rape," Helen said forcefully. "It seems it because she's unconscious *at the moment*. If she doesn't become an extremely willing participant the moment she realizes what's happening, I'll teach a class in the nude." She crossed her arms under her breasts. "We know how likely I am to do *that*."

"Dashing the hopes of every male old enough to understand why the difference between boys and girls is nice to think about," he said with a soft laugh. "It's just that I hate ..."

"I know," Doug said. "But you're doing it to save her life, Harry. Think of it that way. You wouldn't do it for any other reason."

"I suppose so," he said. "Well, is there a specific time or date that it has to be started, or is this a 't'were best done quickly' sort of scenario?"

"Well, the sooner you start, the better off you are," Flitwick responded with a blush, "but if you decide to take all day to properly ... well ..."

"If I decide that I want to take all day loving her, that's fine?"

Flitwick nodded. "The intensity of your emotional state will help, too. It should be love, not just, er, notjustsex."

"It could never be 'just' with her," Harry said sadly. "Could you ... could you all just leave us alone now?" They nodded and left the room slowly, but not before Helen took his face in her hands and kissed him gently on the forehead and then the lips.

"Thank you for trying to save my daughter, Harry. Think of that last one as coming from her, in advance." She smiled at him as his eyes unfocused for a moment, and the sheet covering him gave a strong hint as to the direction that his mind had wandered. "Keep that thought - it'll help." She left the room with the others.

Harry conjured a screen barrier between the bed and the door, just in case someone came bursting into the room. He turned to face the woman that meant everything to him, and smiled. "I hope you can forgive me for this, Hermione. I love you too much to let you just fade away because of that slimy bastard Snape's dark spells." He pulled the covers away and found himself reacting to her - even knowing that she was unconscious, she still had a figure that caused blood flow problems for him at times. He lay down on the bed beside her, pressing his growing erection against the warm skin of her thigh. "Oh my God I love you, Hermione."

He began by gently kissing her unmoving lips, a tear slipping down his face and onto her cheek. He kissed her again, more urgently, slipping his tongue between her lips, torn by frustration and desire and despair as she neither prevented him nor responded. She still tasted like Hermione, honey-sweet with a hint of spice. He licked at her earlobes, which normally would have drawn a giggle from her, and kissed his way down her neck to the collarbone, lost in reverence, as if she was merely asleep and he was trying to tease her awake. "Hermione ... wake up, please. Come back to me, love."

He thought he felt something different in the way Hermione's chest was rising and falling. He backed off to see, to be sure, and he swore he saw her turn her face toward him just a fraction, as if she knew precisely where he was, even with her eyes shut, and wanted him to continue.

He kissed her again, scattering butterfly kisses across her face, her forehead, her cheekbones, her eyelids, and felt a faint flutter of lashes beneath his lips. He brushed his lips down her arms to her hands, suckling lightly at the tip of each finger, and gently grazing each palm. He trembled with hope as her fingers curled, ever so slightly, to lie along his cheek. He placed her hands at her sides again, and turned his attention to her full, beautiful breasts. As he brushed his fingers very lightly across her nipples, he was both surprised and pleased to watch them fill and harden as they always did when he paid them some attention. He teased them for a time with his fingers before moving his mouth to the nearest one and surrounding it. As he gently worked his tongue and fingers across the rosy tips he so loved, he felt them harden more in response until the darker areolas were crinkled and her nipples stood like little peaks. A little part of him yelled "Yes!" inside his head, but the majority of his mind seemed to be seeking her somewhere. "Stay here with me, Hermione. Don't leave me. I need you too much."

He continued the soft torture until he felt a slight shiver run through her. It was becoming impossible to be gentle, and he worried at those tempting nipples with his teeth, suckling hard but trying to keep himself under control since he couldn't use her moans to gauge whether he was doing it hard enough or too hard. He had his arms around her waist, and yes, the pace of her breathing had quickened. He could feel it. He let his fingers slowly glide down her stomach, feeling it quiver as his fingers crossed the flesh, and let those fingers seek one of their favourite places - the soft folds of her sex. He was delighted to discover that she was, while still unconscious, delightfully wet. He gave her nipple a very gentle bite, which drew a soft sigh from her. He looked up in surprise and said, "Hermione?" There was no response.

He decided to move lower with his tongue. She always seemed to enjoy this, but she was usually so sensitive by the time they got to this stage that he couldn't do it for long. He was going to take his time now, and if this didn't get a reaction, nothing would. He spread her legs carefully and slid his face closer to his goal, finally reaching out with his tongue and teasing the hard nub he knew was waiting for him. He heard a slight gasp from her, although she didn't seem any closer to consciousness. He didn't stop, he just kept on licking and

nuzzling and suckling at her, tasting her rich nectar, and reached out with his mind again to try to find her. There seemed to be something in his range, so as he worked her body carefully, trying hard to give her an orgasm, his mind sought the presence of hers.

And then she was shuddering, quivering beneath his tongue. He felt the touch of a hand against his forearm where it rested along her thigh, and he heard a sound somewhere between a sigh and a moan. He didn't stop, but kept at it, sliding two fingers gently into her moist heat. He felt her clutch at the intrusion, and then strong pulses of her muscles surrounding him, rhythmically, and he heard a sound that was stronger than any so far. It wasn't his name, not yet, but it was almost as good. "Oh oh oh aaaaaahhh." He could feel her thighs tensing against him.

After a moment she stopped shaking and relaxed again. "I know you're there, love. Please wake up. Please," he whispered, and climbed her body carefully, finally pressing the tip of his surprisingly insistent erection against the place his tongue had been so delightfully teasing moments before. Her expression had changed now, her mouth was slightly open and he could see her pink tongue, and her cheeks were slightly flushed. Her breathing was fast and shallow. She was *there*, dammit, but she wouldn't open her eyes, not even when he began to slide into her as slowly as he ever did, giving her time to adjust to his length inside her. As he sank into her, he felt the presence again, and he reached for it. It seemed to glow in his mind with a golden colour, and it reminded him strongly of the Snitch. As he began his gentle thrusts into his wife, he found himself searching for the presence as if he were in a Quidditch game. The sense of flying his spirit always seemed to have when with her was as strong as ever, and he began to joyously chase the presence. The physical world seemed to fade away as he flew after his Snitch. Darting this way and that, up and down, side to side, he didn't notice his lovemaking gaining intensity. Nor did he hear her soft gasps in time with his thrusts. Finally, as the physical world tried to remind him that he was about to come and it really would be nice if he were paying attention, his 'hand' reached out and caught the Snitch. He thrust inside her one last time and felt her clutching at him again, pulling him ever deeper into her, and he came in spurts of pure joy inside her, holding her tight.

And he felt her arms slide around him in return, and her hips thrust up against his, and he heard her cry out, "Harry!"

Then he was kissing her again, frantically, in between mumbled endearments and repetitions of her name, and thank all the gods that ever were, she was kissing him back, and her hands were running up and down his back and she wrapped her legs around him. "Hermione?" he groaned. "God, you're awake - Hermione!" And it was quite a while before either of them was able to say anything more coherent than that.

"Harry, my love - you can wake me up from unconsciousness *that* way any time you want to!" she panted at him some time later.

Are you really there? he asked, as if still unbelieving but wishing with all his heart for it to be so.

"Yes, my beloved husband, it's really me. I think I was ... away for a bit ... but we still have our soul bonding. He didn't break it."

Harry gritted his teeth. "Um, actually Hermione, yes he did. You went completely limp, and I brought you to the Hospital Wing and Professor Flitwick couldn't detect the bond anymore, so a couple of hours later I hospitalised Snivellus. We duelled, and I - well, I managed to beat the crap out of him for what he did to you."

"Why? Because of the spell?" she asked, concerned. "You could be expelled, Harry!"

"Not likely. The duel was completely legal and above board, and Professor Flitwick was even my Second. Snape had severed our Bond, which could be seen as attempted murder, since it stood an excellent chance of killing us both. I couldn't feel you anywhere, and I was so frightened. So alone. I knew I couldn't make it without you, Hermione. I'm not whole without you."

She blinked at him for a long time without speaking. Finally, weakly, she said, "Harry, you aren't supposed to be able to renew a Bond like ours. Or there's only a very small chance. How ... how did you manage it?"

“Sleeping Beauty,” he said simply. “It’s why I was making love to you.” He winced, realizing that there was still something painful he needed to tell her. “That brings me to something else, beloved.” He began to pull out of her, but she locked her legs behind him. “You’re pregnant with our son.”

“Since when?” she asked in shock.

“Since I just came inside you. When I had the duel with Snape, we left Hagrid to guard you. He, um, had to use the facilities, and when he came back, there was Malfoy with his pants around his ankles, getting ready to … well, to do something vile to you. Don’t worry, he never touched you,” he said as Hermione recoiled in horror. “He never touched you, I swear! But he had cast a spell to make you get pregnant with a son the next time anyone had sex with you. He intended that to be him. But Hagrid body-slammed him into the wall before he could do anything other than drop his pants and slice off your knickers.”

“But then … then Flitwick found out that the best way to get you to wake up would be to make love to you. And that meant that I’d activate the spell. I didn’t see any other choice, but…” He dropped his head. “I’m sorry that I’ve taken something else away from you. You wanted to wait until after Hogwarts for a child, and now you’ll give birth just after we leave our sixth year.”

She surprised him by squeezing him tightly, both with her arms and the muscles still surrounding him. “Hmm, give birth at my age, or never get older? Tough choice, Harry.” She kissed him deeply, opening the link fully to let him feel her emotions, and he gasped as the warmth of her love washed over him. “I choose to live my life with my beloved husband, taking what comes our way. ‘For better or for worse’ is how that goes, isn’t it? If that means we have a son when I’m sixteen, then we have a son at sixteen. We’re married at sixteen anyway.” She kissed him again, and an impish look came to her face. “Harry, you’re still inside me, and I don’t remember the details of how you woke me up. Could I get an instant replay, do you think? Just so I know how it all happened, of course.”

"Oh, of course. Just so you remember." He hugged her tightly, and she squeezed his cock again, getting him well on the way to being hard again.

"Hey, at least we don't need to use contraceptives anymore," she chuckled in his ear.

Chapter 22

Harry stepped out of the room with Hermione on his arm. They were immediately besieged by quite a large crowd of people, as most of the teaching staff seemed to have taken up vigil in the Hospital Wing, and Ron, Ginny, and Neville had apparently managed to wangle their way in. Harry and Hermione both flushed as they realized how long they had been in there, and thanked Merlin for silencing charms. "Miss Granger!" Flitwick said happily. "How do you feel?"

"Isn't that Madame Pomfrey's question?" Harry asked no one in particular, drawing a slight chuckle from the woman in question as she hustled up to them. Hermione sat on one of the hospital beds while the mediwitch ran a quick series of tests. "Everything seems to be in order, blood sugar a little low, and you're a tad dehydrated, dear, make sure you eat and drink something soon ... oh, yes, and the little visitor is doing just fine, too!" Hermione blushed as a golden glow shone momentarily around her lower abdomen. Helen sniffled against Doug's shirtfront, and Ginny gave a glad noise that sounded a lot like "squeeee!" as she hugged Hermione. Ron punched Harry jovially in the arm while Neville shook his hand in congratulations.

"You seem to be feeling better as well, Mister Potter," Madame Pomfrey said with a smile. "I don't need to do a diagnostic spell to tell me how you're feeling. That smile says it all."

"My wife is back," he said simply. He suddenly grinned widely. "She's back!" he yelled, and quickly picked up Madame Pomfrey and spun her around quickly. "The love of my life is alive, awake, and doesn't hate me for what I had to tell her. How do you think I feel?" He laughed brightly, and he could feel tears of happiness springing to Hermione's eyes, that she made him so ecstatic.

"Now then ... excuse me, Mr. Potter, would you mind putting me down? Thank you. As I was saying ... I hate to remind you of earlier unpleasantness, but I would like to begin the process of regenerating Professor Snape's injuries. Your stasis is still preventing that. Could I convince you to remove it *now*?"

Harry snorted. "I suppose so. He really ought to be awake and potentially as whole as possible for when the Aurors come to pick him up. Let's go wake up Sleeping Ugly." He followed her around the screen that shielded the bed of his long-time tormentor, followed by Hermione, who gasped as she saw the ravaged form.

Was it really necessary to do that? she asked him.

He was calling you a whore, and intimating that you sleep with everyone in the castle, not to mention the fact that he severed our bond. He paused. You need to get used to the fact that I will deal with those who go after you, Hermione. I said it earlier in the summer, and I say it again. Your friendship is that pearl beyond price, and your love is more than I deserve. But since you feel I am worth such a gift, then I consider myself your Champion. I will deal with those who demean and belittle my lady.

As long as I am permitted to be your Champion, Harry. I don't like it when they go after you any more than you like them attacking me. She paused. Which means Malfoy is going to be hurt sometime soon.

Harry couldn't help it — he laughed out loud. "You don't know the half of it, Hermione. Did you know that, at the very least, one quarter of the Malfoy fortune is going to be yours, because Draco Malfoy attempted line theft of the Potter line?"

Hermione was puzzled. "What's line theft?"

"By making you pregnant with his son, he would have stolen the Potter inheritance for his own child ... it's an old-fashioned thing, but I'm told it's still a valid law. But since he got caught at it, one-quarter of his fortune is forfeit to the person whose line he intended to steal."

Her hand shot to her mouth, and then she began to giggle. "You're going to be rich, Harry! The Malfoys aren't exactly a poor family, you know. And Draco will be so annoyed, knowing that he's the reason!"

"You didn't catch what I said, Hermione. The law may say that it comes to me, but it will be yours to disburse as you see fit. It was your body he attempted to defile, after all."

She shook her head. "Where is he? Under house arrest in his quarters?"

Helen laughed. "No, apparently this school still has cells from over a thousand years ago. He's in one of those, being taken care of by a house elf named Dobby."

She looked at Harry, unblinking, for a very long moment. The moment shattered when she snorted several times before collapsing in laughter against Harry. "Dobby? In charge of Malfoy? Doesn't that *define* poetic justice?"

"I certainly believe so," Albus Dumbledore said quietly. "However, delightful as catching up is, Madame Pomfrey is becoming impatient, and dinner awaits the rest of us. Harry, if you would?" He gestured at the still form of Severus Snape. Harry nodded and removed his stasis spell. The Potions Master groaned and shuddered, and for one horrifying second seemed on the verge of screaming his way to consciousness, before Madame Pomfrey spelled him comatose again.

Dumbledore was attempting to shepherd everyone towards the wide double doors when they were flung open and Cornelius Fudge breezed into the room, Percy Weasley and a pair of Aurors in tow behind him.

Who invited him to this party? Harry wondered.

How long before he threatens you with Azkaban or the like? he heard Hermione ask in his head.

I give him about five minutes. I have really just about had it with him.

"Professor Dumbledore!" the Minister for Magic said. "What's this I hear about a duel happening on Hogwarts grounds? And why did I have to find out about it from the front page of the *Prophet* this morning?"

"It was a perfectly legal duel, Minister Fudge," Dumbledore said quietly. "The challenge and the duel were both witnessed by four separate members of the instructional staff, as well as myself, and it

was carried out in accordance with all laws governing such matters. As for notification, there was simply neither the time, nor, quite frankly, the need, to advise anyone outside the school, as it was strictly an internal matter."

"Nothing involving Potter is simply an internal matter," growled the Minister. "The boy's a menace, and if he were anyone else he'd be in the juvenile wing of Azkaban!"

Less than three minutes. I'm impressed, thought Harry.

Azkaban has a juvenile wing? queried Hermione.

Probably had it renovated just for me, Harry replied darkly.

Unaware of the telepathic conversation, and contemptuously ignoring the thunderous looks on the faces of his audience, Fudge continued, "And it leads me to question the judgment of the staff who allow such a thing not only to happen but to be witnessed by children of tender years! What kind of message does it give the student body?" Fudge harumphed.

Harry cleared his throat. "Maybe that there are times when justice simply *must* be served, sir? I do not believe that the duel made anyone think that it would be a good idea to go running around duelling everyone else. The end result was a gory, messy thing that I'd imagine most would rather not have seen. I know that feel that way. If nothing else, it may have impressed some of the students with the need to find another way to solve their problems instead of leading with their wands."

"Yes, well," Fudge muttered, realizing somehow that he'd lost control of the situation the moment he'd entered into the room. "Still, an investigation must be made. Verification. Steps taken to rectify ..."

"Cornelius, I think we should take this into my office," Dumbledore said calmly, trying to lead Fudge away from the Hospital Wing.

"On the contrary, Headmaster, I'm on to your machinations. If you want this in private, it can't be on the up and up. We will have this out

here and now," Fudge demanded, digging in his heels. "We're not going anywhere until I am made aware of the duel's particulars!"

"Then you shall be told, and I shall be the one doing the telling," Dumbledore said, stopping Harry and Flitwick from saying anything. "Both Filius and Harry would put more of a spin on things than perhaps is good."

Fudge glared at Harry, who returned the favour. Dumbledore did his best to ignore the byplay.

"As was reported in the *Prophet*, the duel was between Professor Severus Snape and Mister Harry Potter. Before you say anything, Minister," Dumbledore said, interrupting Fudge before he could speak, "you need to understand the situation that led up to the challenge being issued." Once Fudge made obvious his intention to remain silent pending further information, the headmaster continued. "During the summer, a spell was performed to protect Hermione Granger's parents. It had the rather unusual side effect of forming a soul bond between Miss Granger and Mister Potter."

"A Muggleborn?" Fudge interjected. "How? Soul bondings are rare enough as it is, but with a Muggleborn?"

"And here we see the biggest problem with the wizarding world," Harry said softly, but loud enough for everyone to hear. "When the Minister for Magic can say something so patently asinine and bigoted, and believe it." He turned to face the Minister. "I hate to tell you this, sir, but my wi ... fiancée is not some highly trained animal. She is a thinking, breathing *woman* who is a better spell-caster than most of the students in this school, myself included. She studied O.W.L. level potions when she was a second year student. Yet purebloods such as yourself seem to think that she's worthless because her parents weren't from a pureblood family. And none of you see the inherent bigotry in the statement. 'How could Potter have bonded with something that doesn't qualify as human?' That's what you're really saying." He stopped and inhaled deeply, a sharp sound that worried everyone. "The man who was our Potions professor had similar feelings, and took it upon himself to break our soul bond with a spell that Professor Flitwick apparently thinks should be an

Unforgivable. That, and his choosing to call my wife ... sorry, fiancée — we're getting married in a week ... a whore — that was just a little too much for me, so I challenged him to a duel. He lies in that bed over there."

The crowd obligingly parted to give Fudge a clear view of Snape's bed, where Madame Pomfrey was still working. His eyes widened. "What in Merlin's name did you do to him, Potter? He's missing his left arm, and part of his ribs!"

"I noticed that, sir," Harry said sarcastically. "He was attempting to disfigure me with a storm of gravel, and I cast a *Reducto* to get rid of it. Since I couldn't see clearly, I wasn't aiming at him, and it was just his bad luck that he was in the path of that spell."

"Mister Potter was within the bounds of the duel, Minister," Dumbledore quickly said, injecting himself back into the conversation. "It was obvious to the witnesses that Mister Potter was merely dealing with the centre of the gravel storm, and if Professor Snape had simply moved to either side after casting the spell, as is standard duelling practice, he would have been quite safe. Since he did not perform that common sense step, he suffered the consequences. The terms were to the first wound that required magic to heal it, so Mister Potter, by default, won."

"Well, I'm glad someone had the good sense to stabilise Snape before he died," Fudge said, looking daggers at Harry. "Throwing spells like that around without thought for who may be in its path is inherently stupid, not to mention criminally negligent."

"Well, you'd know everything about being inherently stupid, wouldn't you?" Harry muttered. Unfortunately, he was louder than he intended. "As for the person who put Snape in stasis to keep him from bleeding to death, well, that would be me. Being closest, and all."

"Indeed," Dumbledore said. "When he saw what had happened, Mister Potter immediately cast a stasis upon Professor Snape." He looked sharply at the Minister. "It is because Mister Potter is the person that he is that Severus Snape is alive, and will eventually have an arm again, if regeneration is successful."

Madame Pomfrey turned to face them, her hands and arms streaked with blood. “I don’t see why it shouldn’t be. With as powerful a stasis as Mister Potter cast, I was able to remove the damaged tissue without risking shock or extreme loss of blood. When he took the stasis off, it was as if the injury had just happened. St. Mungo’s will have no problems with regenerating the damaged bits — although it may be the better part of a year before Professor Snape can safely work with a cauldron again.”

“Well, it shouldn’t be a problem,” Fudge said. “Mister Potter can pay for the regeneration — and the lost wages - out of his considerable fortune, considering he caused the damage.”

“Considerable fortune?” Harry asked. “And just what would *you* know about my finances? Hell, even *I* didn’t know until my emancipation, and then ... Wait a minute. Even I know that banks don’t keep all of the money just sitting around. They invest it. Especially with an amount as large as my parents had. Headmaster? Who would have been administering the investments in the trusts after my parents died?”

Dumbledore stroked his beard as he thought. “Well, the executor of James’ Will would have been Sirius Black — and under the circumstances, Sirius was obviously deemed disqualified. The successors would have been Peter Pettigrew and Remus Lupin.”

“Lupin is a werewolf. He was ineligible.”

“At the time, his lycanthropy was not commonly known, Minister. It only became general knowledge a few years ago. By rights, those accounts should have been handed over to him to administer. How is it they were not?”

“Now see here, Dumbledore, this is hardly the time or the place for financial questions. Those can be discussed at a more convenient time in private.”

“You said yourself that if you want it discussed in private, it can’t be on the up and up, Minister. If Mister Potter doesn’t mind discussing this under these circumstances, I don’t think you have any grounds to object.”

"Well obviously I don't have the facts immediately to hand. Nor am I the right person to address in any case. Mister Potter needs to take this up with the Trusts Administration Office ..." his voice trailed off uncertainly.

"... at the Ministry. That explains it right there," said Harry, grimly. "With the Ministry in control of my parents' estate, Fudge and his cronies could skim anything they wanted."

Fudge puffed up in outrage. "How dare you accuse me of such a thing? I'm the Minister for Magic!"

"And one of your closest friends and advisors not on the payroll was a Death Eater," Harry said dangerously. "Lucius Malfoy was often seen around you, and found it easy to get certain things passed through the Ministry. I wonder how that happened."

He stepped closer to Fudge, and the two Aurors with him obviously saw this as threatening. They pulled their wands and aimed them at Harry. He wasn't sure what it was that welled up inside him, but he looked at the two Aurors and shoved at the air in their direction. They lifted off the ground, and it was only Professor Flitwick's quick thinking and rapid casting of a cushioning charm that kept them from serious hurt when they impacted with the wall. "I want answers, Minister, and I'm going to get them." He spun to face the teachers. "Could I convince one of you to go to Gringott's for me and request, in my name, a complete accounting of my parents' accounts? With particular attention to special transactions ordered by the Ministry administrative people? I trust the goblins to have handled the routine work correctly, but I have a sneaking suspicion that things are not entirely on the up and up with our dear Minister and my money."

MacGonagall looked to Dumbledore, who nodded. Harry murmured, "Accio key," and a moment later, two separate cracking noises were heard — once as something whirred into the room, and the second as it impacted with the wall. He walked over to the small dust cloud and carefully pulled the key from the wall. He was impressed to discover that the key was undamaged. The wall, however, was another matter. A rather impressive chunk of stone was missing from

the wall. “*Reparo!*” he cried out in shock, and a moment later, the entire wall nearly sparkled.

He stared at his handiwork as he blankly handed the key to his Transfiguration professor. “I think, ma’am, that I shall be needing a refresher course in my magics. Wandless magic, magic more powerful than when Hermione and I first bonded, a *Reparo* spell that powerful? This is a problem. I just hoping no one was killed on the key’s flight to me.”

“It wouldn’t have been moving faster than sound if it had,” Helen said with a smile, surprise at the incident quite obvious on her face. “That’s what that first crack we heard was, after all.”

He shook his head. “Wow,” was all he could say. Minerva MacGonagall smiled and left the room, but not without Fudge looking as if he wished to stop her. Harry shook his head and looked at the Minister, and then the Aurors. “I’m sorry about that, by the way. I had no intention of actually hurting you. I’m not stupid enough to attack the Minister for Magic, even though he annoys me to no end with his attempts to discredit me and call me insane. Some of the problems caused by his cronies, such as Dolores Umbridge,” he paused as the name made Fudge wince slightly, “were actually a greater disservice to the Wizarding world — setting Dementors on me is one thing, but she abused the entire rest of the student body here as well.”

The Aurors started. One of them stepped forward. “Excuse me. Do you have proof of what you just said?”

“Depends on what you describe as proof. I can prove the usage of a Blood Quill on students — at least one of them.” He held up his hand to show the white lines from the scars of her detentions. In a few spots, the words ‘I will not tell lies’ were still readable. “And I can give you the names of a couple of others, too. You can go ask them. There were several students who heard her admission , including six members of her Inquisitorial Squad, although I seriously doubt that they’ll admit to hearing it. But if you interview Ms. Lovegood, Miss Weasley, her brother Ronald Weasley, and Neville Longbottom, as well as my wife … sorry, fiancée … you’ll hear it from

them. Under rules of evidence, what with our soul bonding, Hermione's testimony might be considered suspect, but I'm thinking that the other four, if interviewed separately, should give you plenty of evidence against her."

Fudge was the colour Malfoy had been just prior to fainting. "You know something?" Harry said, having just thought of something. "I believe that I shall need to swear out a complaint upon our ex-headmistress. I am, after all, legally an adult."

The Auror that had stepped forward spoke again. "I may be forced to withdraw myself from this investigation. My youngest brother is a third year Hufflepuff, and I'm less than pleased to discover that we had a woman teaching at this school who had easy access to Dementors."

"Given the way the trial I was subjected to was handled last year, I do wonder if any other officials in the government knew about what she had done." As Harry said this, his eyes bored into Fudge's.

"I know nothing about this!" blustered Fudge. "Umbridge obviously overstepped her authority ... I never intended ... a full investigation will be made, you can be sure ..."

"Then the Improper Use for Magic Office should be on that list. Those wonderful people who threatened to break my wand at the drop of a hat, and couldn't tell the difference between house-elf magic and mine. Mafalda Hopkirk has a lot to answer for, too. And you, Minister, might not have been specifically aware of what they were doing, but you were certainly willing to use their accusations to support your own agenda. And you've used your position to poison the public, even members of my own friends' families against me." Here he shot an absolutely poisonous glare at Percy. "You might want to head back to your office, Minister. I'm sure you have some people to hang out to dry before they can find out your part in all this."

Fudge stood before Harry for a moment before emulating the younger Malfoy by fainting. Dumbledore eased his passage to the floor before looking at Harry. "I must say that you do seem to live in interesting times, Harry," he finished with a smile.

Fudge was carried to a bed by the Aurors, with Percy fussing over him. Nobody else seemed to be terribly concerned, and it didn't occur even to Percy that the Minister should be revived.

"Now, then," said Dumbledore, assuming the mantle that said he was In Charge Here, and to which the Aurors automatically responded, "I believe you gentlemen have some work to do. Ms. Bones will need to be notified of all this, so that she can start the inquiries into Minister Fudge's conduct, and the Minister's office secured to prevent destruction of evidence. As Supreme Warlock of the Wizengamot, I have authority to order those inquiries, but she should properly supervise them. Then we shall be needing extra Aurors here, as I regret that it will be necessary to take Professor Snape and Mister Draco Malfoy into custody."

"A Malfoy?" said the lead Auror. "What for?"

"Ah, I forgot it hadn't been mentioned so far. Mister Malfoy attempted to commit criminal assault on another student."

"Call it what it is, sir," Hermione said. "He sexually assaulted me in class, physically and magically, then later tried to rape me and commit line theft." She had a stern look on her face.

"Line theft? But that's ... but he ..."

"Exactly," said Dumbledore. "We have eyewitnesses and magical evidence in the form of the spell cast upon Miss Granger to ensure the conception. And since two of the great houses, Malfoy and Potter, are involved, that's a matter for the Wizengamot, over and above the personal insult offered to Miss Granger. Mister Malfoy's mother must be notified as well, immediately, since he is, after all, still underage."

The Auror who spoke headed over to the fireplace in the infirmary and pulled a small jar from his cloak. Activating the Floo, he spoke to someone for a short time before standing up and announcing, "They'll be sending more teams, and Director Bones is on her way. I warned them that we have at least two arrests to make here, and the Minister was likely to put up a fight when we tell him he can't go back to the office." He chuckled. "I think a few people are going to be happy to

be able to arrest the Minister if he's difficult. There may be fights to see who gets to come here."

"Very well, then. Poppy, may I ask you to make sure that Minister Fudge is not disturbed? He seemed quite — distraught — and no doubt needs his rest."

Madame Pomfrey nodded briskly. "I'll make sure he rests comfortably for the next few hours, Headmaster, if you'll get all these people out of my Infirmary. Now that Miss Granger is back on her feet, there's no need for her or anyone else to be here. Out! Out!"

Dinner had already started when the teachers, students, Aurors, and Percy entered the Great Hall. Since none of the students had seen Harry, Hermione, or Draco Malfoy after the duel ended, rumour had been running even more rampant than usual, and the arrival of the Minister in high dudgeon had only added fuel to the fire. Harry made sure that his explanations to the Gryffindors were just loud enough to be heard at the neighbouring Hufflepuff table; he was sure that the story would make it across the room to the Slytherin table by the time the meal ended. It turned out that the Prefects of the various houses, plus whatever D.A. members were available, had been dragooned into keeping order among the students before and after the Duel, which had given Ron and Ginny excellent views of the action, which they described from their point of view. Ron, as usual, suitably embellished his narrative, until Harry wondered if he'd been watching the same fight Harry had been in.

By the end of the meal, things had begun to calm down, when the arrival of Minerva McGonagall, carrying a thick book and accompanied by Amelia Bones and twelve Aurors, stirred them up again. Dumbledore descended from the high table to greet Ms. Bones, and the two of them swept out of the Hall at the head of the column of Aurors, Percy trailing along uncertainly in their wake. Professor McGonagall did not follow immediately, but went to the Gryffindor table. "Mister Potter, Miss Granger, when you are done with your dinner, you will be wanted in the Headmaster's office. I have what you needed, and while I did not look at the contents, I was informed by the goblins that you would likely find it to be interesting reading."

With a glance at each other and a shared thought, Harry and Hermione abandoned the pudding course and accompanied Professor McGonagall up to Dumbledore's office, which seemed to have been expanded a bit to accommodate the large number of people in it. Professor Flitwick and Doug and Helen Granger arrived just behind Harry and Hermione.

Harry took the book from Professor McGonagall and staggered theatrically over to the writing desk that stood under the main window. He began to look at it, then looked up at Hermione. "You're the brains of the outfit, love. I need your help with this." Looking to Helen and Doug, he added, hesitantly, "Mum? Dad? Wouldn't mind your help either."

He wasn't surprised to find all four of them blinking tears away for a moment before they settled into the ledger that the goblins had sent. Not five minutes had gone by before Helen asked softly, but somehow loud enough to be heard by everyone in the room, "Harry, is it safe to assume that you didn't authorise these short term loans? There seem to be an awful lot of them, and they don't bring back much income."

"It's safe to assume I didn't authorize anything. What were they?"

Doug Granger turned the book to see the lists of figures better. "Looks like you've been making short-term loans to these other entities ... you've been getting interest on them, but in small percentages ... as soon as one loan is paid off, another one is made ... hmm, a couple of losses here, not much compared to the total, but enough to notice ... looks like a lot of extra fees attached to these, too ... do these wizards do nothing in round numbers? It's all multiples of seventeen and twenty-nine. Oh, for a calculator ..."

While Doug was bemoaning the conditions of Wizarding accounting, the fireplace roared green, and Narcissa Malfoy's head appeared in the flames. "Headmaster Dumbledore, may I come to your office? There are Aurors here at my home and they're telling me the most ridiculous things about my son."

"Of course you may, Mrs. Malfoy. We've been expecting your call."

Mrs. Malfoy's head disappeared from the flames, and a moment later she spun into the capacious fireplace, followed by two more Aurors. Harry was mildly envious of her ability to just stop and step over the grate without being dumped out as he always was. There must be a trick to it, and one of these days he was going to find out.

Mrs. Malfoy flicked the soot from her clothing and sat regally at a chair in front of Dumbledore's desk, obviously deeming the crowd of Aurors and others beneath her notice. "Now then, Headmaster. I came home from an afternoon spent with friends to find these ... gentlemen ... waiting in my Floo Parlor. They tell me my Draco's in some sort of difficulty? Some nonsense about a girl making accusations about him?"

"Nonsense!" Hermione cried, shooting to her feet. "Your son tried to rape me!"

Draco's mother looked down her aristocratic nose at Hermione. "Oh, did he indeed? I'm surprised at his lack of taste. Or is it that he refused your advances and now you want to make him pay for it? I assure you, Miss ... whatever your name is, Malfoys do not respond to that sort of cheap blackmail. Though you do seem to have set the stage well, with all these Aurors. And these would be the parents and the outraged boyfriend? How predictable," she drawled, acknowledging the Grangers and Harry, who had risen to support Hermione.

"I assure you, Mrs. Malfoy, that this is no unfounded accusation," said Dumbledore sharply. "Your son was caught *in flagrante*, as it were, having removed his own trousers and in the process of removing Miss Granger's clothing while she lay unconscious in the infirmary, unable to defend herself. Additionally, he had cast the conception spell upon her to guarantee that a son would be born of his assault. This last supports a further charge of line theft against him before the Wizengamot."

"Line theft?!" Mrs. Malfoy almost squeaked in outrage as she rose abruptly to face Hermione. "With this little nothing? What possible line ...?"

"Mine," said Harry, stepping to the fore. "You may not remember me, Mrs. Malfoy, but we met once before, at the Quidditch World Cup. I'm Harry Potter, and this is my betrothed, Hermione Granger. We are to be married in less than a week, and your son was attempting to make sure that a son of his blood would be my heir. That is the definition of line theft, isn't it?"

Mrs. Malfoy paled in shock and dropped back into her chair. "Yes, yes it ... you said there were witnesses?"

"Our Care of Magical Creatures Professor, Rubeus Hagrid, was the one who apprehended him in the act," said Dumbledore. "Mister Potter, Professors Flitwick, Granger and Granger, and I arrived barely a moment later, and observed Mister Malfoy being held against the wall by Professor Hagrid. Miss Granger's clothing had been cut, and your son's pocket knife was also found on the scene. Mister Potter, in the process of setting his betrothed's clothing to rights, detected a spell upon her, which I determined, and Professor Flitwick confirmed, to be *Conceptigenus Puer*. Professor Hagrid and I have already placed our memories of the event in a Penseive for the Wizengamot's review. Professor Flitwick has been occupied with other matters, but shall add his memories this evening, and the whole turned over to Director Bones as part of her investigation." Dumbledore nodded in the direction of Ms. Bones, who was sitting quietly in an overstuffed chair near the fireplace.

"Regardless of what the Wizengamot decides, Mister Malfoy's actions are more than sufficient to require his expulsion from Hogwarts. He is currently being held under house arrest in secure quarters, and I have requested the house elves to pack up his belongings to return them to your home. Do you have any questions?"

Mrs. Malfoy hid her face with her hands. "Oh, that stupid, stupid boy! What was he thinking?"

"He probably wasn't," said Harry candidly. "It's not something he seems to be familiar with."

"He's just like his father. Always thinking he's entitled to anything he wants."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. “Unfortunately, in addition to everything else, there’s the issue of a possible challenge for the insult to your daughter’s honour. Mister Potter opted not to challenge, but it is left open for Miss Granger or her parents to do so. Have you made a decision in that regard?” he asked.

“Duelling isn’t part of our traditions,” said Doug. “I understand there are criminal penalties for his actions?”

“If found guilty of the attempted rape, he will spend time in Azkaban or whatever other facility is designated to hold criminals. If found guilty of the line theft, he will pay the appropriate financial penalties. And, of course, the social consequences will be enormous, since he has disgraced his entire family.”

“Can we be assured that he will be found guilty? So far, I haven’t heard much about the Wizarding justice system that fills me with confidence.”

“I shall personally oversee the prosecution of this case, Professor Granger,” said Ms. Bones. “If the evidence is as Professor Dumbledore says it is, then I am confident of obtaining a guilty verdict. Mind you, it won’t be a show trial. We’ve had enough of those, and there will be no more on my watch. But if you’re willing to give us the opportunity, we’ll do our best to do the job right.”

Hermione and her parents conferred briefly, and agreed that it was best to turn Draco over to the Ministry. A team of Aurors were sent down to remove him from his cell and bring him up.

“Miss Granger … Mister Potter. I would like to apologize for my earlier comments. There had been an earlier incident … a young girl who tried to blackmail my son … I thought this was more of the same. I beg your forgiveness,” she finished, formally.

Hermione and Harry exchanged glances. “Apology accepted,” said Harry. “Although you might want to look into that earlier incident to check out the facts.”

"I will do so," she answered, and then returned her attention to the Headmaster and Ms. Bones, to arrange the removal of her son from his cell and his transfer to the Ministry.

Harry and Hermione quietly returned to the writing desk, to find that Percy Weasley was leaning over Doug's shoulder, looking at the ledger of transactions. "Percy, what are you doing looking at my financial statements?"

Doug looked puzzled. "Mr. Weasley offered to help, and since he's your friend Ron's brother ... I thought ..."

"Of all Ron's brothers, he's the last one ..."

"Excuse me, Harry, but I really did just want to help," cut in Percy. "And I think I can. I recognize some of these other firms, and I can assure you that they're just short term investment houses. Minister Fudge recommended them to me and I have some of my own money in them. They're good solid investments, and they provide a dependable return. Not large, but dependable, and that's something in these troubled times. This one, LXM Holdings, in particular ..."

"What!" snapped Narcissa Malfoy, interrupting. "Did you just say LXM?"

"Yes. Do you know it?" asked Percy.

"LXM is Lucius Xavier Malfoy. It's owned by my husband."

"It's WHAT!" Harry and Percy cried in unison.

"It's an investment company owned by my husband. Have you been investing through it?"

"Not knowingly. Someone at the Ministry Administration Office has been putting trust funds from my parents' estate through it. Looks like now we're going to have to get their records. If the goblins will release them," Harry said.

Mrs. Malfoy paused for a moment, obviously thinking things over before coming to a decision. "I will arrange for the books to be produced," she said. "You'll find it's not entirely on the up and up, I regret to say. He takes in money in the form of investments or short-term loans from other individuals, makes high-risk, high-profit investments with it, then returns a low rate to his investors and pockets the rest. His own personal investing is much more conservative. May I see those ledgers?"

Harry did his own moment of consideration, and then allowed Mrs. Malfoy to look at the documents. "LXM, LXM, Fabrikant Investments ... that's not Lucius, but I know who it is."

"Will you tell us voluntarily," put in Amelia Bones, "or are we going to have to charge you and bring you in for interrogation?"

"I just ... I'll tell you everything I know as long as I'm granted immunity. I wasn't a direct participant in this, but I did know about it."

"I think that can be arranged."

"Fabrikant is owned by Cornelius Fudge. Lucius showed him how to set up the investments and skim the profits."

Percy emitted a strangled gasp. "I can't believe ... the *Minister*?"

"He's as corrupt as they come, Mister Weasley. Let's see, Mister Potter, there are two open loans to Fabrikant, and ... eight? To LXM. All in the past few months ... and I'll bet those extra funds are going ... Ms. Bones, under what conditions is my husband being held? He's not currently in Azkaban, is he?"

"No, it was decided not to send anyone there after the Dementors went walkabout. He's being held at the Ministry."

"In a standard holding cell?"

"Of course not. Wealthy prisoners have always been able to pay for better accommodations, food, a few luxuries. It's been a standard practice for centuries."

"I've been keeping the household records since my husband was arrested, and no funds are coming out of the family money for that. I'm afraid, Mister Potter ..."

"You mean *I've been paying for Lucius fucking Malfoy's cushy quarters?!*" Harry practically screamed. Dumbledore winced at Harry's language, but nobody called him on it.

"It's worse than that," admitted Mrs. Malfoy. "Surely you know that my husband has other associates ... with whom he shares his political leanings. Quite a lot of this money has been going to fund ..." She broke off, unwilling to say it.

"Has been going to fund the Death Eaters." Harry went pale, and Hermione shoved a chair behind him just as his knees gave out. "He's been using my money to bankroll the damned Death Eaters."

"You and whoever else he could con into it," said Mrs. Malfoy. "Cornelius convinced quite a few Ministry employees to put their own money into LXM and Fabrikant both. I don't know if he knew the ultimate beneficiaries of the funds Lucius took, but he was perfectly willing to take a cut for himself. Lucius considered it one of the costs of doing business. Additionally, he's set things up so if an audit reveals these transactions, he will take you down with him. To the financially unsophisticated — which is to say, most of the Wizarding community — these transfers are damning." She considered the page of the ledger that showed the outstanding 'loans'. "Given the amounts he's currently 'borrowed', I'd say he's gone beyond cautious embezzling and money laundering. He probably realized over the summer that he was going to be found out soon, and has been siphoning largish chunks out with no intention of investing or covering up. Most likely he's been providing it directly to the Dark Lord."

"What ... what can I do?" asked Harry helplessly.

"I already told Gringott's to put a lock on your accounts and not allow further transfers," said McGonagall. "You'll have to call them to confirm that."

"That's something, anyway."

"We'll be needing those books from you as soon as possible, Mrs. Malfoy," said Director Bones. "We'll be able to find out from them exactly how much money we're talking about. We'll also have to get the Minister's records and find out how much he's taken out of this scheme. Then you'll be entitled to restitution and interest on those amounts, as will any others who have been defrauded."

"And how many years will that take?" asked Doug, who was familiar with how long government reimbursements took in the Muggle world.

"About a week," answered the steely-haired witch. "Once set on the track of fraud, the goblins will be ruthless about rectifying it." She smiled, but it had no humour in it. "Lucius Malfoy will be thankful he's in a nice safe prison, and Fudge may yet be demanding the cell right next to his. The goblins can be pitiless — and literal — in demanding their pounds of flesh. Then once that's done, there will be the transfer of one-quarter of whatever is left of the Malfoy funds to Mr. Potter, here."

"To Miss Granger, you mean."

"If that's how you want it," said Ms. Bones, making a note on her parchments.

"No, that's not how I want it," said Narcissa Malfoy, abruptly. "As Draco's mother and the de facto head of the Malfoy family, I hereby acknowledge his guilt in the matter of line theft and request that the payment of one-quarter of the family assets be made immediately — before my husband's criminal penalties are levied."

"But ... but that will result in much more ..."

"Yes. It will result in a larger payment and means that the reimbursements may very well bankrupt my soon-to-be-ex-husband."

"You're going to ..." Harry seemed suddenly unable to finish his sentences.

"Lucius and I will remain married only until the necessary financial transactions — and the total disinheritance of my son — are complete." Narcissa looked at Harry and Hermione for a moment before closing her eyes. "Such marvellous men in my life," she said in a tone dripping venom. "One is a Death Eater, and the other follows blindly in his father's footsteps. I regret that these are the only steps I can take to mitigate the damage they have caused."

"Will you be all right?"

"Oh, yes, there were settlements made when we married. My own money has been invested safely. I won't be living quite in the same style, but I think an extended trip to the Continent might be good for my health after this anyway. I doubt that my husband's associates will be pleased with what I have done. Now then," she said briskly, "if the Aurors can produce my son so that little matter can be dealt with, I think all of this can be wrapped up fairly shortly."

The Aurors in question having been cooling their heels outside Dumbledore's office for the past several minutes, producing Malfoy was quite rapid. Malfoy himself seemed to be glad to be out of the hallway, which had suddenly become the single most popular route from anywhere in the castle to anywhere else as everyone found a reason to pass by and gawk at him and his guards.

"Mother! I am so glad to see you!" Malfoy said, stumbling towards his mother with his hands dramatically covering his face. "You won't believe what they did! They imprisoned me! And tortured me! It was terrible!"

"Really, Albus. Torture?" asked Director Bones.

"We put him in a safe cell in the dungeons. He has received food and water, and even had his own house-elf to wait on him. He was perfectly comfortable."

"*Comfortable?!*" screeched Malfoy. "You have no idea what that house-elf did to me ... the things it thought passed as food ... drink ... it insisted on ... on *talking* to me. All the time! And singing! Oh, the horror!" Realizing that his mother had for some inexplicable reason not taken him into her arms and assured him that all would be well

and that she had ordered his tormentors killed, Malfoy risked a peek between his fingers. His mother was just standing there, her arms crossed and her lips pressed into a thin line. "Mother?"

"Draco Malfoy! I have never been so disappointed in my life! I'd ask what you were thinking, except that I'm sure you weren't! A more empty-headed stunt I've never heard of, you little cretin! You are a disgrace to your family!" And Mrs. Malfoy proved that she would probably be the equal of Mrs. Weasley with a Howler, except that she wasn't restricted to the amount she could write on a parchment. Draco backed away from her in shock until he bumped into his Auror escort, who pushed him forwards again to face his irate mother until she wound down. When she stopped, she abruptly reverted to her normal icy cold demeanour. "On your behalf, Draco, I have admitted to the charge of line theft based on your attempt against Miss Granger, and the appropriate penalties are being paid to the injured parties. I have agreed to your expulsion from Hogwarts, effective immediately. And as your parent and the head of the family, I hereby formally disown, disinherit and dispossess you of any claim to the Malfoy name, property or estates. From this point forward, you are none of ours. I will be filing the appropriate papers with the Ministry first thing in the morning." She turned crisply toward Director Bones. "After that business is taken care of, I will come to your office to discuss our other business. And after that, I shall make the Manor open to such Aurors as you wish to send to remove certain ... artefacts ... that I do not care to have in my home any longer."

Draco sputtered in outrage. "Mother, those are Father's ... you can't do ..."

"Can't I?" She looked at him coldly. "I have the perfect right to do what I wish with whatever objects are in my home. You, on the other hand, have no right to anything in that house any more, nor any say as to how I wish to dispose of it. If you are very, very polite to the Aurors, I may see fit to send you some clothes. Otherwise, I am afraid you will be limited to the contents of your trunk. Now, Director, Headmaster, I believe we are finished here? Very well, then. Until tomorrow." She turned her back on her son, took a handful of Floo powder from the jar on the mantel, and vanished into roaring green flames.

Director Bones shook her head. "Surprising backbone in that one. Never thought I'd see the day. Now as to this one, Cunningham, McCoy, you take him down to the Apparation point and back to the Ministry."

Manacles were snapped on the ashen-faced Malfoy's wrists and he was hustled with little ceremony out the door. Harry wagged his fingers at him and Hermione blew him a cheerful kiss good-bye, and they could hear the beginnings of a cheer from the students in the hall as the Aurors escorted him from the school.

"Headmaster, if you don't mind, the other Aurors and I will go down to the Hospital Wing and take custody of the Minister and the Professor, and deal with them appropriately. Mr. Weasley, you will accompany us to the Ministry and provide my men with complete access to the Minister's office and files."

"Of course, Director. Any help I can give ... anything you need at all ..." He gave her a little bow and began gathering up his things.

Harry rolled his eyes. Percy would never change.

In a surprisingly short time, it was all done. The Aurors were gone, Fudge and Snape were gone, and Harry, Hermione, the Grangers and the teachers were the only ones remaining.

Harry collapsed into an overstuffed armchair. "Wow. I really did not ever expect to have anything like that happen. I'm not dreaming, am I?"

"No, my boy, you're not," said Dumbledore, relaxing into his own chair and steepling his fingers. "But you probably should be. I'd imagine the last two days are going to catch up with you quite shortly, and it would really be advisable for you to be in your bed when that happened, instead of in some random hallway somewhere."

The very suggestion seemed to summon up a yawn, which Hermione echoed. "You may just be right, Professor. I'm looking forward to having the weekend to recover and then just getting back into the regular flow of things, you know?"

"That won't be happening for a while, Harry," Helen said, laughing. "There's going to be a wedding on Thursday, remember?"

"Well, yeah, I remembered that, but that's all set up, right? I just have to show up and stand there and say the stuff, right?"

Helen and Hermione looked at each other and shook their heads sadly. "He has no idea, does he?"

Harry looked to Doug for support, but received none. "Harry, my boy ... you're doomed. Just go along with them if you know what's good for you."

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By Tuesday, Harry understood exactly what Doug meant. He had no idea there were so many details still to work on for the wedding, or that every single one of them would require his input. He really had no preference as to mock orange or jasmine, or whether to use plain white ribbons or ribbons in the Gryffindor house colours for the seat decorations, and he had taken to hiding in unused classrooms or broom closets whenever he saw Hermione, Helen, Minerva McGonnagal, or Ginny (who seemed to have appointed herself to the Wedding Committee) coming towards him with a purposeful stride. The Marauder's Map and Invisibility Cloak were his new best friends, and he never went anywhere without them.

Finally, Thursday morning dawned. Hermione had been whisked off to spend the night in her parents' apartment, and Harry had not slept well without her. He rose unnaturally early for him, dressed quickly, and went out to sit on the castle steps and watch the sun come up. The mist slowly dissipated from the lawn, but shreds of it still hung in the shadows of the woods when Harry decided to go back in and see if the house-elves had breakfast on yet. He reached down to pick up the Map from the step where he had placed it, and froze. There were dots, many of them, moving through the mass of stylized trees that marked the Forbidden Forest. The little labels that bore the names overlapped each other and the trees too much to be clear, but Harry's heart started pounding nonetheless. He leaped to his feet and ran to Dumbledore's office, meeting the aged wizard just as he left to go to breakfast. He waved the Map under Dumbledore's

nose. "Headmaster, in the Forest," he gasped. "They're coming! The Forbidden Forest is full of Death Eaters!"

Chapter 23

A mere five minutes later, Dumbledore's office was crowded again. Most of the staff was there, and Harry had sent a mental message to Hermione which resulted in her, Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Luna packing themselves into the office as well. Ginny and Professor McGonagall seemed to be taking the "the groom shall not see the bride on the wedding day" tradition rather seriously, and conjured a screen, making Hermione stand behind it. Harry couldn't help but laugh when he saw the partition. He could feel Hermione on the other side of it, giggling. "I'm going to go out to fight Voldemort today, and you're worrying about me seeing Hermione before the wedding?" he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Nice to know where your priorities lie."

He heard another giggle in his mind and a *Shush, you!* He laughed out loud, albeit quietly.

The Floo flared green, and Amelia Bones, accompanied by Aurors Dawlish, Mopson, Tonks and Arbuthnot, spun into the room, summoned by the urgency of Dumbledore's message. Harry, by this time, had spread the Marauder's Map out on Dumbledore's desk, and the Headmaster used a projection spell to cast an image of it up on the wall so that everyone could clearly see the crowd of dots that marked the invading force. There was silence for a moment before Helen said, "Excuse me, but who invited the Death Eaters to this wedding? I distinctly remember telling someone that I thought those white masks with those drab black robes were extremely gauche."

Harry laughed again as he watched everyone turn to Helen as if she'd lost her mind. He was pleased by her ability to keep her head under circumstances such as this. He laughed louder as he heard Hermione answer her mother. "Mum? We did. We invited the Death Eaters. Remember, that was the reason for setting this wedding date in the first place? We wanted to draw Tom Riddle out before the date he thought the protections could be cemented over Harry and myself?"

Harry slapped himself in the forehead. “I don’t believe it!” he grumbled. “I was one of the ones involved in the planning, and I forgot it!” This had the effect of drawing laughter from everyone and calming the entire meeting down.

“Okay,” he said, when everyone had calmed, “we need to get to work. At the moment, they’re milling around in the forest, waiting for something.”

“They’re trying to bring down the wards, Harry,” explained the Headmaster. “Quite frankly, it’s been centuries since Hogwarts has had to stand against a massed attack, and they think they can bring down the wards by sheer force of numbers. They’re wrong, of course, but we can let the wards weaken a bit to keep them focused, then drop them long enough to draw the Death Eaters in when we’re ready and bring them up again behind them.” He spoke calmly, as if organizing a daisy-picking party.

Harry nodded. “Okay, then. I’m expecting that they’ve managed to either subvert or chase off the worst of the creatures in that area of the Forest. Centaurs and Acromantulas and the like don’t show up on the Map, so it’s anybody’s guess what else they may have on their side. If we see Acromantulas coming out of the forest, I don’t care — we shoot to kill.” He looked at Hagrid. “I’m sorry, Professor. I know he’s a friend.”

“If ‘e’s gone over ter You Know Who, then there’s no choice,” the Magical Creatures professor grumbled. “Don’ want no one goin’ after ‘im if there’s no need, though,” he added tersely.

“I see no reason to,” Harry said. “If he and his stay out of it, then I’m fine with them. In fact, if they don’t get involved on Tom’s side, then I have no problems with them eating the escaping Death Eaters, as long as they try to leave us enough to identify.” He pursed his lips, looking at the Map. “As a matter of fact, once the Death Eaters are out on the lawn and move past your hut, maybe you could Floo down there and sneak out the back door and go ask where they stand. I really don’t see Tommy’s side wanting to have anything to do with them.” Harry turned back to the rest, finding their eyes wide, and ignored the unspoken question. “I know the members of last year’s

D.A. well enough to know that they'll want to be involved in this fight. We should get all the students into the Great Hall along with a few teachers to supervise. Hermione and Helen, I want you in charge of the fifth-year D.A. members to guard the Hall and the corridors near it." Hermione began to object that she was perfectly capable of fighting, until Harry interrupted her. "Yes, I know you're willing to risk your lives, but the babies haven't been asked. I want you two someplace safe, all right? Okay. Ginny and Neville, you'll take the sixth-years up and take pot shots from the battlements. Seventh years can choose between the wall or fighting with the Aurors and teachers."

"Where am I going to be?" asked Ron.

"You're with me, wherever I am. I'll need my best mate to watch my back, right?" He turned back to the map. "The rest of us need to see where the heck we can be best used, but a lot of that is going to come down to where Tommy boy decides he wants to fight. Fortunately he doesn't seem to be in a rush. I think that we should station a few people in the Astronomy Tower to get a good view of the action. Luna, you take that detail. Use the owls to coordinate attacks from the battlements."

Auror Mopson cut into Harry's planning. "Who made you leader of this fight, Mister Potter?" His tone was not overtly insulting, but it held no possibility that he thought that Harry could be a good leader.

Harry answered by lifting his hair away from his scar. "Tom did, Mister Mopson. Fifteen years ago, he thought that I was a threat, and tried to kill me. Today I prove him right, and kill him. He dies, and we go on with our lives. More precisely, I go on with my life with the woman that I can't see on the other side of this barrier."

Amanda Vector spoke up. "As I understand it, part of it was to protect you from You Know Who. If he dies today, then you could wait to get married, you know."

"No, for two reasons," Harry replied. "First, I've been looking forward to this for so long. Second, because of Draco Malfoy's interference, if I don't marry her, the child she bears right now would be legally illegitimate. We were going to wait, but Malfoy scotched that." He

smiled. "The most important reason is the first one, though. I love her, and I'm going to marry her."

He shook his head, refocusing on the matter at hand. "Students will do for the defence, but we'll need as many Aurors as we can get for the main fighting. Director Bones, please get as many here as possible as quickly as possible. We may have to open the Floo connection in the Hospital Wing; it's got the biggest fireplace and we can move people out of it quickly."

Dumbledore nodded and activated his Floo, sticking his head through the flames for a minute before Ms. Bones took her turn to call the Ministry. "The Floo and the Aurors should be ready within fifteen minutes."

"What sort of plan do you have, Potter?" Bones asked.

"I have a good idea what needs to be done, but I can't plan too much, ma'am. No plan survives first contact with the enemy. I'm going to have to concentrate on Riddle, and the group with me will have to keep the Death Eaters off me while I do that. Basically, we'll need to spread the rest of our forces around a bit, but in clumps instead of solitary fighters. Is there any way of getting groups of people placed quickly on the grounds without lowering the Apparition wards? And for groups to signal other groups if they need help for heavy fighting?"

"Yes," Dumbledore said. "Targeted portkeys will serve the purpose. We give each team portkeys that will home in on the others. Unusual, but quite effective." He smiled, eyes twinkling. "Also a great deal easier to create than normal portkeys, but no one seems to make them for some reason."

"Well, we'll have to figure out how many groups there will be, and then we can make them. If possible, set them up to flash a different colour, based on which group wants the help, and then portkey to that group. Those would be good activation words, by the way - using the colour of the group to be the word."

Kingsley Shacklebolt stepped through the door as Harry finished. "Sounds like a good idea, Potter. We could only bring

another fifty Aurors, unfortunately. The others are downstairs," he said. "We're awaiting decisions as to deployment."

Without thinking, Harry responded. "I want at least one group stationed in Hogsmeade, preferably more. I wouldn't put it past Tom to send some of his goons down there to terrorize the villagers and burn down a few houses to try to divide our attention. There are already people down there who can fight ... the rest of the Weasleys, Remus, Moody ..." He didn't want to mention the Order in front of people who weren't part of it, but he knew Shacklebolt would know who he was talking about. "Beyond that, you're more used to this sort of thing, Madame Bones, so I am definitely willing to listen."

Amelia Bones looked at Harry in surprise, and her eyes slid around the room, finding only one person not considering him the leader of this group. "Well, Mister Potter, given a school this size, it can be difficult to truly plan, especially when we have so few to fight on our side, but your basic plans are sound. Let's start getting people into position."

"Most of the students are in the Great Hall for breakfast right now," said Dumbledore, consulting the Map. I believe those of you who have contingents of the D.A. to lead should go down to collect them. Minerva, would you go make the announcement, and stay to keep order? Let the students know what's happening and reassure them that everything will be done to keep them safe. If some of the seventh years who aren't part of the D.A. want to fight too, send them to the Entry Hall. The Aurors and the rest of us will be there and we can assign them to groups."

"Dawlish, you and Mopson go down too and arrange for the defence," said Bones. The room became much less crowded as the two Aurors, Helen, Minerva, and four of the Ministry Crew headed off to follow their instructions.

Harry noted that dots were beginning to congregate in the Entry Hall, all labelled "Auror" with names appearing as the Map identified them. "Director Bones, I think you and I and the rest of our group should go down and explain what's happening to the Aurors. Professor, could you make seven color-coded portkeys —

like a rainbow — and maybe a gold one for the command group — that's us? Eight groups should be enough."

"Agreed," Albus responded. "Go on ahead. It will be easier for me to concentrate on the portkeys when my office is clear. I'll be down with them shortly." He waited until everyone else had left the office, then stopped Harry by putting a hand on his shoulder. "I don't have the right to feel this way, after my history with you, Harry, but I am proud of the man you have become. And I know that your parents and Sirius would feel the same way."

Harry blinked at him. "Thank you, sir. It means more than you might think." With that, he followed Amelia Bones downstairs to the Aurors.

It didn't take long to divide the Aurors into groups, supplemented by teachers and seventh-year students. While the organization was going on, a stream of D.A. members poured out of the Great Hall and up the stairs (which were staying put for once) to the battlements, Astronomy Tower, and the Owlery.

He was interrupted as he heard someone thundering down the hallway toward them. The person came to a stop, hands on his knees, panting furiously. The hair looked a quite familiar red, and the style he'd last seen just a few days earlier.

"What are *you* doing here?" asked Ron, angrily. He stepped forward to challenge his older brother, but Harry put his hand up to stop him.

"What's wrong, Percy?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," the tall man wheezed. "Just ... just wanted ... just wanted to throw in on ..." He stopped and took a moment to gulp down a few breaths of air. "I want to fight with you. Look, I know you have no reason to trust me, but ... I'm still Gryffindor. I went to work for the Ministry to help. I was so sure that other people — that Fudge — was working for the good ... I was stupid. People are people. Working for the government doesn't make you a saint. I was wrong, and when I can, I'll tell my family that. Or you will, if I die today. If you let me stand with you. Please?" He looked at Harry, and then over Harry's shoulder at Ron, and Harry could see the sincerity screaming out of the man.

His hand came out and clasped Percy's shoulder. "Welcome back, Percy. I'd be proud to have another Weasley at my back when I face Tom."

Ron glowered uncertainly for a moment, then relented and offered his hand to his brother. "We'll talk later. For now, we've got a Dark Lord to fight."

As Amelia Bones was finishing organizing her teams, Dumbledore came down the stairs, carrying eight brightly coloured rings. "Muggle toy called a hula hoop," he said as he passed them out. "I have charmed them to flash when it is activated, simply by tapping your wand to it and saying 'Activate'. All the others will flash in the colour of the team that needs assistance. Fairly obvious what your colour is," he finished with a smile, pointing out that each hoop was the colour of one shade of the rainbow. "To portkey to the team in need, simply tap your wand to your own hoop and say the colour that your hoop is flashing."

"Now, the initial deployments will be through the various hidden exits. Indigo team, you're for Hogsmeade and have the longest trip so you'd better start now — the tunnel to Honeydukes is located—"

"Password to the humpbacked witch still *dissendium*?" asked a middle-aged Auror. Harry gaped and nodded. "Don't be surprised, your generation wasn't the first to find that tunnel," the Auror said, grinning. "And it won't be the last. Indigo team, let's go!"

Exits were assigned for the other teams. As they headed off, Harry turned to Dumbledore. "Okay, I think you can let the wards down now to let the Death Eaters up on the lawn. Tommy finally got there, according to the Map," he said, pointing at the dot labelled "T. Riddle". Then he looked up, with confusion on his face. "But why don't I feel him? My head should be pounding right now."

"Isn't that a fortunate thing, though?" Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. "I was hoping that would be the case, but of course I could not be sure."

Harry frowned in puzzlement, then suddenly his eyes widened with shock. Dumbledore merely nodded. "I see you understand. Now run

along, there will be Death Eaters at the door momentarily, and I'm sure you'll wish to greet them properly."

Harry took the gold hoop and started to speak, but broke off in mid-sentence and stood straighter for a long moment before settling back to his previous pose. His eyes were much harder, however. "Someone run to the Great Hall and tell Mopson I need to speak to him," Harry said, his voice cold.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Amelia Bones asked. She had assigned herself to the yellow team, which was the only one that hadn't left yet.

"Unimportant right now, really, in the scheme of things. Better get your people in position. If you run into Mopson, though, I *really* need to talk to him."

She nodded, somewhat confused, and took off with the rest of her team. Harry and his team, which consisted of Ron, Percy, Doug, Dumbledore, Tonks and Shacklebolt, waited silently in the hall. Harry watched the dots on the map move, then carefully folded it and tucked it his robe pocket. He appeared perfectly calm and somewhat distant. Only Ron, who knew him best, seemed to see the tension building behind his precise movements, but the redhead kept silent as well.

A few moments later, Mopson arrived, somewhat out of breath. "They said you needed to see me?"

Harry exploded into motion. He grabbed the Auror by the throat and threw him against the wall as hard as he could. "Yes, you little shit. How long have you been a Death Eater?"

"What are you talking about?" Mopson asked. He tried to pull away from the wall, but found himself stuck fast. "I'm an Auror! How dare you accuse me!"

"*Evanesco*," Harry whispered, and suddenly Mopson was naked in front of himself and Dumbledore. The black Death Eater tattoo was obvious on his arm. "Did you really think that the wards wouldn't tell us when Hermione and her mother were portkeyed out of the building?" He turned to Dumbledore. "Would I be turning Dark if I

decided to kill this man for being a Death Eater and sending my wife, not to mention my mother-in-law, into mortal danger?"

Doug made an incoherent noise, and Ron grabbed his arm to stop him from going after Mopson.

"It depends, Harry," Dumbledore said calmly. "Were you going to torture him or simply cause him to cease living?"

"The latter, sir. As much as I'd like to torture him, Hermione and Helen would think less of me, and I won't do that."

"Then I see no problems with a simple execution. You might want to hurry it up, though. We do have guests on the front lawn."

"Well, Mister Mopson, it seems that you should make peace with your gods, whoever they might be. If Albus Dumbledore, one of the kindest and gentlest souls I know, says that it wouldn't be Dark to kill you, then I think I will. Don't worry, I'll be quick about it." He raised his wand and pointed it at the Auror.

"Wait!" Mopson screamed. "I can give you information!"

"What possible information could you give me that would mean anything to me?" Harry asked. "Now hold still, this won't hurt a bit ... I think ..."

"He's weak!" Mopson shrieked like a little girl scared of being left alone in a dark room with a hungry Acromantula. "Ever since really early last Thursday afternoon, he's been incredibly weak! Something took his power. He's only been keeping at his old level by draining everyone around him!" The Death Eater Auror was actually crying. "He doesn't know what you did to him, and he wants to stop you from making it worse!"

"So he sent you to grab my wife?!"

"No, that was my own idea. I was just supposed to disrupt the defence from inside. But when I found myself alone with them, I tricked them into touching my escape portkey and sent them to the Dark Lord. I thought he could use them, make a trade ..."

"My life for theirs, huh? As if I'd listen to him for something like that. He's well known for renegeing on deals. I wonder if he knows that he's safer with them alive? If he kills them, I can't guarantee that they'll find anything of him large enough to bury. And they definitely won't find enough of you."

Mopson looked at Harry for a long moment, and realised that he had chosen the wrong side. Before him was not a mere wizard, but the very Spirit of Vengeance and Justice. He took the same action that Draco Malfoy had a week earlier, only going a step further - he not only emptied his bladder, but voided his bowels as well.

"Coward," Harry chuckled. "Everybody get that?" he asked in a louder voice.

"Yes, Mister Potter. Excellent work, I might add." Dumbledore waved his wand quickly and the malodorous ex-contents of the man's digestive system were whisked away to elsewhere.

Harry grinned. "Should I cast a *Scourgify* on him to get him cleaned up before we drop him in a cell?"

"Are you set on sand-blasting the man's privates, Harry?" the headmaster asked with a smile.

"Might make him think twice about being involved in something like this ever again."

"Assuming he survived the experience."

"You're right, sir. He's not worth it." Harry fought very hard to keep from laughing as he heard Mopson whisper, "Thank Merlin!" Harry looked to Dumbledore and said, "Please give him a cell with a place to clean up, then." Dumbledore summoned a house elf, and a moment later, Mopson was gone.

"Well, Harry, since I happen to know that the wards told me no such thing, I can only assume that you felt Miss Granger and her mother shift position."

"She's in my head, sir. That telepathic thing, you know. They're both all right at the moment, just being forced to listen to a pureblood superiority rant. I'm getting the whole thing. They're coming up the main drive now."

His head shot up. "I'm sorry people, I need to get out there and set fire to Draco Malfoy's privates. Some other Aurors who wear the Dark Mark set the male Malfoys free, and Draco is currently out fondling my wife's bits. Rather roughly, I might add." He began to stalk purposefully toward the main entrance to the school, muttering something about the Ministry's hiring standards being almost as lax as Dumbledore's. His teammates exchanged glances and fell in behind him.

He was almost to the door when he stopped, giggling. "Oops. Hermione just did it for me. He's out there squealing 'Put me out! Put me out!'" Then he sighed and all humour left his features again. "But now Daddy's decided to get involved ..." The doors slammed open without anyone touching them. "Oh, Lucius, you're not going to be happy after I get through with you," he growled. Raising his voice and adding a *Sonorus* to the mixture, he shouted, "Lucius Malfoy, you flobberworm-shagging bastard, strike my wife again and they'll be working for weeks to scrape up enough of you to build a memory!"

He stopped abruptly, and behind him heard Ron gasp in dismay. However much they had expected this, seeing the row of black-clad Death Eaters on the front lawn of the school was a shock. There were Dementors about, too. Not close, Voldemort wouldn't want them so close that they would handicap the Death Eaters, but Harry could feel them, could hear the faint screams in the back of his head. Hermione's warm touch in his mind helped him ignore them for the moment.

Voldemort's voice hissed across the lawn, amplified by his own *Sonorus*. "Quite the bravado, Potter, when you know I hold the lives of your Mudblood whore and her harlot mother in my hands. Especially when you're out here practically all alone, facing the combined might of my forces."

Harry glanced to the side, suddenly realizing that the Auror squads were using Disillusionment charms and could not be seen. And the D.A. members were hiding on the battlements so that all that could be seen above was a few owls. Apparently Voldemort was really thick enough to believe that Harry would come out to meet him with only a few supporters.

"At least I'm out here showing my face. You're hiding behind a wall of black robes and a couple of stolen women. If you want to talk, come out here where I can see you. Otherwise I'm just going to go in and have breakfast, and you can stay out here and keep sucking off your Death Eaters — and draining their power, too." Harry could actually hear sudden intakes of breath from both sides at his blatant insult. "The longer you stay out here, the weaker you get. So this is a no-lose situation for me."

"You would abandon your whore and her mother to me? So much for Gryffindor honour!"

"Tommy, you're smart enough to know that if you kill them, you lose your only bargaining chip. The only thing keeping me from cutting through your entire so-called army is the concern that my wife and mother-in-law might get hurt." He paused again. "But I never said I was going to have breakfast alone. You've taken two people dear to me, Tom, and I'm going to get them back."

"You've been weakened as I have, Potter. Don't bluster when you haven't the power to back it up."

"Really, Tom?" He grinned out at the Death Eaters and whispered "Accio sexy woman." He was a little surprised to find *both* Helen and Hermione flying toward him at high speed when he'd intended to get Hermione first and grab Helen next.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a sickly green bolt of light flying at Hermione from somewhere in the midst of the throng of Voldemort's followers, and his Seeker's ability to judge trajectories told him the beam would hit her before she reached him. Acting on instinct, he did the only thing he could think of - he shouted, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" and flicked his wand at the deadly spell, which deflected skyward.

The silence in both camps was sudden and palpable.

Harry had only a moment to slow down the hurtling women, bringing them to a gentle stop before him. "Thank you for grabbing us both," Helen said as she hugged her husband. Hermione simply giggled.

"Shush, you," Harry said, his face blazing red. "We have things to deal with right now."

"Right," Hermione said. "*Accio* wands." Two spears of wood shot from the Death Eater camp, one of them lifting the still injured Draco Malfoy off the ground quite a distance before dropping him unceremoniously to the ground as his robes ripped. The wands slowed and fell gently into their owners' hands.

"NOW!" shouted Harry, and suddenly a barrage of spells shot from the Disillusioned groups of Aurors, who had been able to work their way unseen into excellent vantage points. A second later, more spells came flying from the battlements as the D.A. members popped up and began peppering anything in a black robe and white mask with a wild variety of spells. The Death Eaters were not slow to return fire, and since Harry's group were the only ones visible, they took the majority of the initial attack. Dumbledore had been prepared, and cast a massive Shield spell which was probably the only thing that saved them, but the elderly wizard was able to do nothing else while he was maintaining it. Spells impacting on it caused it to coruscate with brilliant colour.

The fight quickly became more a deadly brawl than anything resembling a controlled battle. Curses flew randomly and violently, as the Death Eaters changed targets in an attempt to find the Auror groups. Voldemort's forces, however, did not attempt to move forward, and the reason soon became apparent.

The air temperature seemed to drop suddenly and shadows covered the lawn. Harry glanced up briefly, to see that the sun was still shining, but there seemed to be little light coming from it. The Death Eater line broke up to permit sinister cloaked figures to glide through. There were muffled shrieks and screams from the battlements. The Dementors had taken the field.

"Oh, fuck," said Harry, as Hermione clutched his arm. "That's more than there were third year."

"Third year they left some in Azkaban and some came here. This is probably all of them," said Hermione.

The Dementors converged rapidly on Harry's command group, undeterred by the barrage of spells focused on them. Suddenly, they seemed to collide with an invisible wall — Dumbledore's shield spell. Piling up in a mass of grey-cloaks and withered flesh, they slowly began to push the wall back. "Harry," said Dumbledore in a strained voice, "if you have a plan for dealing with these ... now would be a good time."

"I think we're back to basics on these." Harry kicked his *Sonorus* back in. "Everybody that can ... *EXPECTO PATRONUM!*" As Dumbledore's shield finally went down, Harry's stag and Hermione's otter came bursting out of the ends of their wands, glowing silver in the half-light. Followed by another. And another. And another.

By the time half a dozen stags and a like number of otters had surrounded the Dementors, a flock of other silver animals had joined them, starting with Cho's swan sailing majestically down from the battlements. The Auror groups and D.A. members on the walls produced an assortment of animals ranging from hedgehogs to elephants, including a multiwinged thing that had to be one of Ginny's Bat-Bogies. Doug managed to produce a thick cloud of silver mist, while Helen's wand projected a baby tiger cub.

Percy Weasley goggled at the tiger. "A baby *Patronus*?"

She shrugged. "Hey, it was my first try. Go get 'em, tiger!" The tiger cub blinked adorably and scampered off to worry the edge of a Dementor's cloak.

Percy groaned. "Tell me you did not just say that!" He thought of the happiest day of his own life — the day he received the Head Boy badge for seventh year. "*Expecto patronum!*" A huge cloud of silver mist resolved itself into a magnificently maned lion, which roared happily and bounded into the fray.

Well, if Percy can do it, I can do it, thought Ron. Concentrating on his own memory of winning last year's Quidditch cup, he summoned forth a silver border collie that started joyfully herding up a few Dementors which were making a break for it.

Led by the stags, the assembly of *patroni* herded the Dementors into a smaller and smaller area, forcing them to pile up on each other, packing them tighter and tighter. The animals ran widdershins around the Dementors, moving so fast they formed a band of silver with an occasional flash of paw or horn or tail or wing, ever tightening on the black blot of embodied despair in the centre. The Dementors likewise lost their individual shape, merging into a single seething blob which shrank in upon itself until suddenly, in between one breath and the next, it was gone. With it went the preternatural cold and shadow, and the morning sunlight once more fell golden across the grounds. The circle of silver animals faded away, all but one stag, which trotted up to Harry and bowed its antlered head before dissolving.

Despite the spectacular conflict of Dementor versus *Patronus* in the centre of the lawn, the general combat continued. Dumbledore, exhausted, was on his hands and knees behind the command group, now being protected by a shifting patchwork of smaller shields cast by the students and Percy. Once it was obvious that the Headmaster's shield would not be coming back up, curses once again began to converge on the command group. One grazed Hermione's arm, causing her to flinch in pain, and a moment later, blood and gore spouted skyward as someone within the ranks of the Death Eaters literally exploded. "Sorry love," Harry murmured.

"S'okay, Harry. Just rein it in, okay? That was disgusting."

"Gotcha. No exploding the Nibblers. Even if they do mar that perfect body of yours." Harry fired off several random curses, and shrieks were heard from the Death Eaters.

"Harry, my body is anything but perfect," she replied, firing a handful of Cutting Curses. Grinning evilly, she targeted Antonin Dolohov with one of them, and smiled as she saw him start to bleed

profusely. Harry, on the other hand, could feel the deep horror she truly felt.

"Hush, woman, and leave my fantasies alone!" he said melodramatically. *It's all right, love. As long as your whole life isn't aimed at getting revenge on various people, you're not going Dark. A very wise and beautiful woman taught me that, and would do well to take her own advice.*

Thank you, Harry. It just bothers me.

"I know it does." He fired off another curse at random, and was very surprised when three Death Eaters turned into a hippopotamus, a giraffe, and an aardvark. "What the hell did I just cast?" he wondered out loud. "I think it's past time to end this. Helen, get the Headmaster to safety, and stay there with him. We're going to take the battle to Tommy boy." He began to walk toward the greatest clumping of Death Eaters, who were obviously protecting their Lord and Master.

The four with him fell into step around him, Doug taking point, Ron and Hermione to either side, and Percy taking the comment about a Weasley at his back quite seriously. Hermione was in charge of shielding, while Doug and Ron were firing off curses and Stunners. Percy, when Harry spared him a quick look, was attempting to look in every direction at once in an effort to keep his commanding officer as safe as possible.

Suddenly an odd electric blue spell came tearing through Hermione's shield. Before anyone else could react, Percy intercepted it with his body, blood spraying with the impact. Before he had hit the ground, Harry had already cast the most powerful stasis he could conceive of, and then spun in the direction of the caster, who was currently looking smug. Harry snarled, and suddenly the caster's chest literally exploded outward, meat and bone flying everywhere.

"No one hurts my family," was all he said as he spared a look at Percy. It was obvious that Percy was still alive at the moment, but since Harry had no idea what had struck him, he couldn't guarantee how long that would remain the case - only the stasis was protecting him now. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see clouds of smoke

rising from happening in the direction of Hogsmeade, and prayed that there were enough people in the town to keep the place safe. He couldn't help them. He had a job to do.

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Down in Hogsmeade, the Weasleys were in the forefront of the fighting. Curses were flying left and right, and more often than not, they were striking Death Eaters and bringing them to their knees. The townsfolk had rallied the moment they saw the Weasley clan exit The Three Broomsticks like a Celtic clan of old, and the thirty or so novice Death Eaters who had been sent to attack the town were beginning to wonder if perhaps this might not have been a bad idea.

It had started in The Three Broomsticks with five black robed people coming through the door. The majority of the Weasleys, along with Remus, Moody, and a teenaged waitress, were gathered downstairs for breakfast, waiting only for Bill to make it down the stairs to join them. Rosmerta was behind the bar stocking for the day. "No one move," a Death Eater said in a tone of quiet menace.

He was answered by a chair flying across the room at him, which knocked him back into a wall, cracked his mask, and left him foolishly holding his broken nose. The other four Death Eaters looked at him in surprise. This wasn't the way things were supposed to go. "Sorry, Rosmerta" Charlie said, "but we need to teach these fools a lesson." He flicked his wand at the door and it sealed itself with a squelch.

"Fine by me," she laughed, flinging a bottle of Ogden's at the Death Eaters, who had figured out that they were in trouble, but had not the foggiest idea what to do about it. A spell shot out before the bottle could reach them, and it shattered, spraying them all with whiskey. Arthur grinned evilly and said, "*Incendio!*"

Two minutes later, there were five singed and unconscious Death Eaters tied up rather thoroughly and locked in Madame Rosmerta's storeroom, and the waitress had taken refuge in the kitchen.

Charlie unstuck the door and was about to open it when he heard a sickening crunch from outside followed by a number of people

shouting variations on “Where in hell did *he* come from?” He flung open the door quickly to reveal Bill getting to his feet, using the body of the Death Eater he had landed on as a shield. “Mum! Dad!” he said brightly. “Fancy meeting you here!”

“William, did you land on that man?” Molly said with some consternation.

“Yes, Mum, I did.”

“Did you at least land properly?”

“Yes, Mum. I waited until he was right in position under my window. He made an excellent cushion.”

“At least you took proper precautions,” she replied. She seemed ready to fight, but everyone in the family knew that she’d likely schedule a small nervous breakdown for after the fight.

“Can we talk about this later?” Arthur asked calmly as he fired a stunner into the crowd of Death Eaters. “We have other things to do right now.”

“Of course, Dad,” Bill answered, shoving the dead man forward into the nearest living Death Eater, and the fray was joined.

The battle was surprisingly brutal, and utterly unfair. For the Death Eaters. With the Order members leading the fight, the rest of the townsfolk came out in force, and soon the attackers were surrounded. Although the villagers generally knew only schoolboy hexes and jinxes, the majority of the Death Eaters seemed to be inexperienced and fought poorly. The curses they threw were weak, spaced well apart. They seemed to think that the villagers would roll over in terror at the very sight of them, and were totally unprepared for resistance.

They were even less prepared for Fred and George Weasley. While Bill and Molly had bantered in the street, the two of them slipped out the back of The Three Broomsticks and ran down the back alley to their favourite haunt of old, Zonko’s Joke Shop. They pounded on the back door to attract the attention of Zonko’s son, who had been

opening the shop for the day when the Death Eaters arrived. "Let us in, Zeb! We need ammunition!" Zeb opened the door and the two of them headed directly for the lime-green store display of the latest Wizard Wheezes. "Good thing you keep fully stocked on our stuff!"

"Those are Death Eaters out there," quailed Zeb. "What are you going to do, prank them?"

"For a man who runs a joke shop-", said Fred as he ripped open a box of Portable Swamps.

"-You have a surprising lack of imagination," finished George, stuffing his pockets with fireworks.

"These things all have safety charms." Fred shoved an armload of cans of Silly String — something the Muggles had almost got right, and of course the Weasleys had been able to improve on it — into Zeb's arms.

"But we, of course, know how to take them off!" George brandished a double handful of fake wands. "Come on! We don't want the Death Eaters all used up before we get there!"

That end of the street was a melee of Death Eaters versus shopkeepers. Though outnumbered, the Death Eaters were not slow to use the Cruciatus Curse and other nasties which the shopkeepers couldn't counter; on the other hand, a good Jelly-Legs Jinx, though basic, could keep a Death Eater down long enough that he could be kicked in the head.

Fred started the show by sailing the black disks which were the packaged form of the Portable Swamps out into the street. He'd been practising, and they flew quite well. Where they hit, they expanded into large patches of mud, muck and slime, and anyone standing there sank up to their knees. One Death Eater disappeared entirely into a patch of quicksand.

This was followed by a round of Catherine wheels and other Weasley Wildfire Whiz-bangs, which shot to and fro throughout the battle, singing and exploding various Death Eaters and carefully avoiding local citizenry. Meanwhile, George was tapping all of his fake wands

against the street, which turned them into rubber chickens. The chickens promptly animated and ran about pecking at Death Eaters and administering Shocking Charms each time they hit.

Finally, the twins joyfully grabbed a can of Silly String in each hand and darted into the confusion, spraying anybody wearing a black robe and a white mask with strings of the brightly coloured goo, which immediately wrapped around their targets and then hardened up into unbreakable bindings. Zeb looked doubtfully at the cans he had left, then shrugged and jumped into the fight to do his own share of Stringing.

In the middle of the street, a team of Aurors erupted from Honeyduke's, and the villagers there thankfully yielded the combat to the more experienced fighters, only grabbing Death Eaters and throwing them back into play if they tried to crawl off.

The fighting at the head end of the street was just as furious, although considerably less entertaining than down by Zonko's. The leader of the invaders was a different story from the green fighters she led, and she fought like a dervish, keeping both Moody and Remus busy. She launched an *Incendio* at them, which both of them ducked, and it flew into The Three Broomsticks behind them. A moment later, Madame Rosmerta jumped out right through the front window, and less than a second after that, every bottle of Firewhiskey in the place went up with a roar. Remus rolled away from the explosion, but Moody was less agile, and a well-placed *Expelliarmus* threw him backwards into the flames. He did not come out.

Remus growled and climbed to his feet as the Death Eater removed her mask and threw it at him contemptuously.

"Is the ickle wolfie mad?" taunted Bellatrix LeStrange as the smoke billowed through the street. "His wittle playmate went bye-bye. Now he can go, too." She raised her wand. "AVADA —"

Remus' eyes glowed yellow with anger. He moved faster than anyone had ever seen before, and punched her hard in the face before she could react. She screeched in pain and spun to face him. "How dare you, you foul mutt?! No one touches me and lives!"

"Ah, that explains your husband," Remus replied. "Took one look at you and died of the shock." He spun out of the way of a blast of pure magic from her, jumping in to hit her again, even harder than before. Nearby fighters could hear bones breaking. From the way the two combatants landed, it was obvious that none of the broken bones belonged to Remus.

Bellatrix got to her feet painfully, but before she could steady herself, he was behind her back. Quickly putting his arms around her, he gripped her right shoulder with his left hand, and her left cheek with his right hand. The twisting motion and the resulting crunch sickened a few people, but far more simply began to cheer at the death of one of Voldemort's most feared lieutenants. By this time, most of the Death Eaters had been caught between indigo team and a line of impassable swamps (complete with alligators), and fighting was beginning to die down as their numbers decreased.

Remus walked toward the surrounded Death Eaters. "Well, that was a nice warm-up. Any other Death Eaters want to play with the werewolf?" An aura of menace surrounded him, reminding everyone that no matter how mild-mannered he was, the wolf was only lightly chained within him. Wands clattered to the ground as the remaining Death Eaters surrendered. As the Aurors collected the wands, Remus said, "Thank you. If you don't mind, I'm going to go be sick." He found a clump of bulrushes on the edge of the swamp and was violently ill behind it, while Molly rubbed his shoulders and crooned something comforting. Behind him, there was an explosion in The Three Broomsticks and the roof collapsed inwards. A plume of black smoke rose into the sky.

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Harry was making progress, cutting through the thickest press of the Death Eaters, when he suddenly felt a cold and metallic hand at his throat. "Wormtail. Wondered when you'd make an appearance."

"You can die right now, you know. All I have to do is close this hand that Voldemort gave me, and I will be exalted above all other Death Eaters."

Shit! ‘...either must die at the hand of the other ...’ Harry thought. That’s Voldemort’s hand! Shit, fuck, and all the other other four-letter words! He made no effort to move a muscle. “You’ve got me, Pettigrew. I think you misunderstand Tommy’s point of view, though. I have the distinct feeling that if you took away the pleasure of killing me from him, he’d make you regret it for a long, long time.”

He could feel Pettigrew’s indecision, so he continued. “Do you really want to end up on the same ward as Lockhart and the Longbottoms? I think he’d take no end of pleasure turning you into even more of a gibbering fool than you already are, Pettigrew.”

The hand tightened slightly. “I can hurt you badly in the meantime, Harry. I’d watch the insults. You can be as stupid as Sirius when it comes to that sort of thing.” The hand relaxed slightly. “I miss the damned fool hound. Why did he have to get involved? Why couldn’t he have just sat back? He’d still be alive today.”

“Because he understood something that you never will, Peter. There are things worth dying for. Your boss isn’t one of them. But saving the life of a friend, rather than turning friends over to be murdered - that’s worth dying for. You were never a real Marauder, you worthless piece of shit. In the name of the three spirit Marauders, I cast you out.” He could feel the pulse of magic burst from him, and heard the gasp from his attacker. In that moment, he saw Doug’s wand come down, and he felt a small trickling of blood as the cutting curse that Doug used removed the silver appendage. Harry quickly cast a spell to staunch the flow of blood from both himself and Pettigrew, and then reached up and removed the hand from his throat, Banishing it quickly. “Thanks, Doug. I see you got why I was trying to piss off the rat.” He quickly threw another stasis over the whimpering Animagus.

“Took me a few seconds. I’m not as smart as my wife and daughter.”

Harry laughed. “You were smart enough to marry Helen.”

“True.”

They all turned to face the crowd of Death Eaters surrounding their foe, and Harry simply put his hands together and then yanked them

apart as if pulling open a rather heavy curtain. Masked wizards went flying pell-mell, leaving just the inhuman looking Dark Lord standing alone.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" Tom shouted before anyone could react.

No! Harry screamed in Hermione's mind. He tried to reach out to stop the spell, but they were too close. He felt the curse strike her, and cringed in preparation of feeling her wonderful light going out forever.

Instead, both he and Hermione were astonished to feel a third presence announce itself and take hold of the magic, twisting it and shaping it as one would manipulate soft clay. Suddenly, the power was released again, back at Voldemort, only it was a brilliant white light that coruscated around him for a long moment, making him shriek in agony. Finally it disappeared, and he stood before them, barely able to keep upright.

Harry faced the so-called Dark Lord. "Tom, your reign of terror is over. You've been draining my power my entire life, but when Snivellus cut the bonds on me, he cut *all* the bonds, including the one between *you* and me as well. I didn't weaken, Tom - I kept the power you used to drain away from me. Now you have only the link to the Death Eaters still standing."

He stared for a long moment at his long-time nemesis. "I think it's time we reverse that spell that you cast after the Tri-Wizard Tournament. You still have something of mine, Tom. My blood. The blood of the enemy, forcibly taken. *I want it back! Accio blood!*" He felt his stomach turn as Riddle screamed. Reddish-black blisters bubbled up under the Dark Lord's skin and broke. The foul-smelling liquid ran down his body to the ground and flowed across the intervening space between Riddle and Harry. It formed a noisome puddle at Harry's feet. He could hear the sound of people nearby retching at the horrifying sight, and even the Death Eaters recoiled in horror.

Finally, it was finished, and a much looser skin hung on the Dark Lord's frame. He looked vaguely like a mummy, his flesh dark and wrinkled and desiccated. He was somehow still alive, if one could

call that life. Hermione picked up the refrain. “Flesh of the servant, willingly given,” her clear voice called across the field. She pointed at Pettigrew and grinned as she said, “*Reparo!*”

This was a much faster reaction, as all the skin and muscle simply dissolved from Riddle’s frame, and Pettigrew developed a proper hand again. All that remained of Riddle was a skeleton, glistening wetly in the light where the hands and skull protruded from its robe. Helen spoke up. “To hell with finishing the chant of the previous spell!” she snarled, casting the Bone-breaking Curse. The skeleton shuddered and crumbled, and a fine powder settled to the ground.

From the pile of bone dust and black fabric, a wispy form slid skyward. It looked vaguely like a ghost, but it had red eyes that glowed evilly even in the sunlight. Harry could hear a feathery soft voice whispering, “I can’t be destroyed, Potter. Haven’t you learned that by now? I’ll simply find a new body and keep going. I am immortal, Potter, and you will simply die.”

“Sorry Tom, but you’ve been misinformed. You go on to your next life today, and you even have your own traitor to thank. The only thing holding you here now is your ties to the Death Eaters, and I know what to do about that.” Harry looked carefully at the gliding ghost and whispered, “*Trennen Sie Bindung.*”

The crowd gasped as they heard Harry’s spell cast, and watched as the spirit form before them simply ... vanished, leaving only the ghostly strains of “No!” fading in the air. Those Death Eaters still standing on the field shrieked for a moment and then fell as if Stunned. All but Draco Malfoy, who stood alone amongst the field of crumpled forms. His robes were still smouldering in the area of his groin, and he was looking more than a little spell-burned in other ways as well.

“Well, Draco,” Harry said conversationally, “you were smart enough not to take the mark, but dumb enough to fight with them. You’ve no money, no home, and no sense. And Doug Granger still has the right, I think, to deal with you in a more permanent manner.” Harry turned. “Dad?”

"Well, if there are any trustworthy Aurors still standing, I say that he should just be taken back into custody."

Looking around at the ground full of masked people, Harry replied, "I think any Aurors still standing are trustworthy. Let's get a few of them." He turned back to Draco. "Oh, Draco? I have something I've really wanted to say to you for the last five years, and the feeling got that much stronger when you tried to rape my wife."

"W-what's that, Potter?" the blond ex-student asked. Being the last one standing on the Dark side was, he was realizing, not an enviable position to be in.

Harry answered by swinging out with a violent uppercut thrust directly into Draco's stomach, hard enough to lift him from the lawn by roughly a foot. "Barbaric, I know, but quite satisfying," he finished, turning his back on the now vomiting Draco as two Aurors came over and took him back into custody.

Harry simply stood still for a moment, staring across the lawn, seeing but not registering the piles of black fabric that marked where the Death Eaters lay, the groups of Aurors and students moving among them, piling the dead in heaps and taking the still living into custody. The dark plume of smoke rising above the forest in the direction of Hogsmeade was now interspersed with brightly coloured magical sparks and fireworks that spelled out things like, "WE WON!" and "TAKE THAT, MOLDIESHORTS!" He began to shake, his hands becoming so numb he almost dropped his wand before Doug took it out of his hand. "Hermione, Ron, get him to sit down before he falls down," the older man said quietly. "He's going to have one hell of an adrenaline crash in the next few minutes." Doug used the gold hula hoop to summon a medical team for Percy while Ron and Hermione dragged Harry back to the front steps of the castle and eased him down to sit at the base of one of the guardian statues.

The doors of Hogwarts stood open now, and the D.A. members who had been on the battlements came pouring out now, to help with the mop-up on the ground. Aurors and seventh-year students who had been fighting stumbled exhausted back up into the Entry Hall. Many of them saluted Harry as they went by, but he barely noticed who

they were. Ron was a little more alert, though, and cried out, "Oi! Bulstrode! What are you doing down here?"

The Slytherin girl, her robe torn and blood-stained, stopped briefly to answer. "I was fighting, Weasley, as if you couldn't guess. It wasn't only Gryffindors who didn't want him," she said, jerking her thumb over her shoulder to indicate where the Dark Lord had fallen, "in charge of things."

"Only seventh-years were supposed to be out here!" said Hermione, indignantly.

"Well, nobody was exactly checking ages when I joined up with Orange Group," laughed Millicent. "And we Slytherins aren't exactly noted for following the rules. See you inside once we're all cleaned up. Maybe we can talk — really have a conversation — then. I think things will be changing now." She waved and staggered off up the stairs.

Ron and Hermione sank down on either side of Harry, all three of them experiencing the let-down now. Hermione wrapped her arms around her beloved, and he responded in kind, both of them shaking and trying to hold back tears. Ron hesitated a moment, then joined in the embrace, laying one arm along Harry's shoulders and reaching around with his other hand to grasp Hermione's arm firm. "I guess it's all over, then?" Harry whispered, as if needing to reassure himself and them. "This is the end of it?"

"No, Harry," murmured Hermione, "this is the beginning."

Chapter 24

After his bout of post-adrenalin shakes was finished, Harry walked the grounds to more fully check out the damage. He came across the area being used momentarily as the morgue for those who had fought on Harry's side - the Death Eaters were currently being left where they were. He was surprised to find that the death toll for his side was very low, consisting almost entirely of Aurors. He was saddened, though, to recognise a student among the dead - Marietta Edgecombe, with Cho Chang kneeling beside her, crying. He dropped to his knees and put an arm on Cho's shoulder. She leaned into him and continued to cry.

A short time later, he felt Hermione's hand on his shoulder. He looked up. "I may have had my problems with what happened last year, but ... she wanted to make up for it. Why couldn't she have stayed in the battlements?"

"I understand." She put a hand on Cho's other shoulder, and the seventh year student looked up into Hermione's sad face, and smiled weakly at her.

"Why did she have to die?" Cho asked plaintively.

"I know that it's never a good answer, but sometimes that's simply the way it is," Doug said quietly. "Look at her face, though. She died knowing that she was doing the right thing. That isn't a look of fright or shame. That's a look of determination. Your Miss Edgecombe died knowing she was helping to save people she cared for. She died saving her friends."

Cho looked carefully at her friend's body and smiled, this time a little stronger. She nodded at both Hermione and Harry, who helped her to her feet. "Mister Granger, thank you. The loss of my friend will hurt, but you're right. At least she died a hero. Thank you for reminding me of that."

Harry looked out over the grounds, again noting the damage. "I'm going to be famous from this stupid battle - even more so than before," he growled. "Well, I'm going to use it, damn it. Whoever

ends up with the Minister's job is going to give these people here the Order of Merlin, First Class, or I'll know the reason why. They *died* to defeat Voldemort. All I did was to fight a massively weakened opponent and finally kill him. I was fulfilling a destiny, while they could have avoided the battle without shame."

"Harry," Hermione said, "I want you to promise me something. I know you well enough that you'll fight it if they offer you the Order of Merlin. If not for yourself, please accept it for us. For me. You faced a madman to save my life."

"And mine," Helen said.

"Do it for Marietta," Cho said simply. "She died supporting you, Harry. Let us thank you for being there to end this menace." Harry nodded after a moment, understanding the sentiment.

"Oh, I'm curious about something," Helen asked, making it obvious that she was trying to lighten the mood. "Why did you blush when you saved Hermione and me?"

Harry's blush returned full force, and he mumbled a response while Hermione started to giggle. "Stop it, Hermione," he pleaded.

"You don't want her to know that she was saved because you think she's sexy?" Hermione finally asked. She turned to her mother and said, "When he called for me, he must have been distracted, because he said 'Accio sexy woman'. That's when we both shot at Harry at high speed."

Doug laughed. "I told people he was smart! He fell in love with my daughter, and he thinks his mother-in-law is attractive! Brilliant young man!" He pulled the three of them into an awkward hug, one filled with humour, though.

Finally, they disengaged from the embrace and began to walk toward Hogsmeade. Harry veered toward the Forbidden Forest as he saw centaurs exiting, dragging something behind them. When he was much closer, he discovered that it was a large number of dead Death Eaters. Bane stepped forward. "Hail, Harry Potter. We thought you might desire these back. We had intended to deliver them to you

alive, but they simply stopped a short time ago. We believe that they died when the Dark One did. We also made no effort to stop those who chose to invade the area inhabited by Aragog and his mate and children. I would imagine that they are simply food by this point."

"Pity," Harry murmured. "I would have liked to have identified them."

Hermione thought about it for a moment. "That might not be a problem. They are spiders, after all. They'll have no use for the husks when they're done, so they'll probably leave them out for Hagrid if he asks, with the clothing still on them. We can collect them and identify them then."

Ron turned green. "I wouldn't wish that on anybody. Not even Death Eaters."

Harry shook his head and looked up at Bane. "Now I get to try to talk whomever takes charge of the Ministry into treating fairly with you and the other magical species."

"You will do what you planned, although the stars still hold a surprise for you in that regard," Bane said with the first smile that Harry could ever remember seeing the centaur bestow upon a human.

"Great," Harry laughed. "Even the stars have it in for me." He held out his hand to Bane in friendship and found Bane gripping his forearm in a sign of brotherhood.

"You and those you hold dear are welcome in these woods, Harry Potter. We ... / look forward to your next visit." There was a quiet gasp from those who had joined Harry's entourage - Bane's attitude toward humans was legendary amongst those who had gone to the school.

"I look forward to visiting, Bane. May the stars be clear and the hunt easy." This time the gasp came from the centaurs at a human knowing enough to offer them a centaur blessing. "Not to be rude, but I really need to see how the others are doing, Bane."

"See to your herd, Harry Potter, and we shall see to ours. Until next time." They turned and disappeared into the forest, leaving behind the dead.

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He finally made it into Hogsmeade, where he could still see fireworks being set off by the twins. "Harry!" they bellowed when they caught sight of him. "Jolly good show!" Fred shouted. There was smoke still rising from various areas of town, the thickest being around the remains of the Three Broomsticks. Harry's progress was slow as he passed through the throng of people wanting to thank him. He finally arrived to see people working their way through the wreckage, cooling things as they went - water sprayed from various wands into the smouldering ruins. Bill, Molly and Arthur Weasley were helping with the building while Charlie comforted a crying Madam Rosmerta.

"I'd ask what happened," he said, "but that would be rather stupid. How many did we lose?"

"Surprisingly few," Remus said, walking up behind Harry. "They sent in a team of incompetents. In fact, other than Moody and Gina, the waitress at the Three Broomsticks, I can't say that I've heard of anyone from our side dying down here. They had five toasted in the Broomsticks, Bill broke one, the Aurors got three, and we still don't know how many the alligators got. Then the rest of them sort of fell over unconscious, and we figure those should be put on your tally. The only reasonably dangerous person they had here was Bellatrix LeStrange."

Harry whirled to face him. "She was here? What happened? Where is she?"

Charlie leaned over and said, "We were reminded why it's a bad idea to get Remus mad. Broke her neck with his bare hands."

Harry looked at his old teacher, and recognised the look. "Remus, I'm sorry you had to do that. She needed to die, but I'm sorry that anyone but me was forced to render the final blow." He pulled the man into a heartfelt hug.

"I let the wolf out, Harry," Remus replied. "I never want to do that again."

"I understand. Maybe not completely, but I do understand. I just wish ... I wish I could ... I was able to kill Tom, but ..."

"I know, Harry, I know. Let's get to helping the others." They set to moving wreckage of the Three Broomsticks to see if anything could be salvaged. The first floor had come down into the ground floor, and virtually the only thing that wasn't ruined was Charlie's trunk, which, of course, was dragonhide and hence fireproof. Once the remains of the upper level were removed, the charred bodies of the Death Eaters were located where the storage room had been. There was no sign that they had ever moved or come back to consciousness, something for which the Weasleys were grateful.

There was no trace of Moody or the waitress. There was, however, muffled singing coming up from under the floorboards. A single flick of Harry's wand peeled the rest of the remains of the Three Broomsticks away and revealed the entrance to the cellar beneath; a second flick ripped away the thick oak trapdoor and the layer of dampened sacks that had been tacked up across it on the inside. A wobbly soprano voice sang, "Somebody shouted MacIntyre!" and a strong bass joined her in repeating "MACINTYRE!"

"And we all got blue ballsed parasomething something," warbled the soprano.

"I don't think that's how it goes," came Moody's voice, interrupting the chorus. "Blue ballsed? Surely not."

Harry started for the stairs, but Bill held him back. "I don't think you should go down there, Harry. You're underage, and this sounds like it's not going to be pretty."

It fell to Remus and Charlie to go down into the cellar and convince Moody and Gina that it was safe to come out. As Charlie helped the extremely unsteady-on-her-feet young woman up the stairs, Moody bellowed, "Here here! Keep your hands off m'fiancee!" and pushed Charlie out of the way to help Gina up the rest of the way

himself. Remus was laughing so hard he practically had to crawl up the ladder.

With the exaggerated dignity of one who is truly and mightily pissed, Moody put one arm around Gina's waist and held his wand at the ready, just in case there were any remaining death eaters hiding behind the burned-out bar. "Gentlemen ... oh, and gentle ladies," he said, bowing carefully to Rosmerta and Molly Weasley, "may I introduce the future Mrs. Moody. Got engaged somewhere between the second and third bottles of Old Ogden's," he said proudly.

"Not that I'm complaining, mind you, but how in Merlin's name did you two survive?" Remus asked incredulously.

"Next time I see Dumbledore, I'm gonna suggest he finally tell Binns that he's dead," the old Auror said solemnly. "Cast your mind back to first year - to Wendelin the Weird." This was met with a round of palms meeting foreheads.

"The Flame Freezing charm," Remus muttered. "Of course."

"So what happened?" Harry asked.

"Well, I got thrown backwards into the Broomsticks, and cast the charm as I did. I was about to come back out to join the fight, but I heard Gina here screaming, so I went to help her. Have to turn in my Heroic Auror card if I left a lady to get toasted, y'know. So before the roof came down, I got us into the basement and reinforced it. Course then we had to find some way to pass the time until you finished playing with the Death Munchers. Didn't happen to save any for me, did you?" He turned to Rosmerta without waiting for an answer. "It did get kind of warm down there, so we drank some of the firewhiskey to keep it from igniting. And we used butterbeer to wet down the sacks on the door. You'll be happy to know that we managed to save the rest of your stock, Rose. You can be up and running again in no time!"

"Thank you, Alastor," she said. "It will be a while before I can manage that, though. I just don't have the cash to hand immediately to build a new inn."

"How fast could it be rebuilt if you had the materials?" Harry asked.

"Three days. You already did most of the debris removal."

"Remus, I'll need you to find me a good construction company. I'm donating the materials to get the Three Broomsticks rebuilt."

"Mister Potter, I can't afford that!" Madam Rosmerta squeaked.

"Did I say that you were paying for it?" Harry asked her with a smile. "I'll buy the lumber and such, and pay for the workmen to rebuild the inn. Then we'll have the Three Broomsticks back in business in no time." He met eyes with Hermione, and she nodded. "In time for the wedding, in fact."

"That's supposed to be today!" Molly exclaimed. "Oh dear, all our dress clothes ... oh dear ..."

"Don't worry about it," he said. "We just decided to hold off for a few days. People died today, and even the Death Eaters deserve to be mourned by someone. We lost many brave Aurors today, not to mention Marietta Edgecombe, fighting against Tom Riddle. It just wouldn't feel right to celebrate on the same day that we have to tell a family that their daughter died." He shrugged. "Besides, a few people need to buy new things." He looked at the Weasleys. "As a thank you for being there for me, please let me replace your things. You've been there when I needed you most, so let me do the same. It's not as if I can't afford it."

Molly sniffed and nodded, and Amelia Bones came forward, Susan right behind her. They both had been talking to Arthur Weasley moments before in hushed tones. "Mister Potter," Amelia said, "you might be interested to know that a few Aurors back at the Ministry fell over, unconscious, when you defeated Vol - Riddle. Fudge almost escaped, but there weren't enough collapsed men to make it feasible for him to do so. Fudge is in custody, and we need a new Minister."

"I'm glad to know about Fudge, and I assume that the moneys he stole will be returned soon?"

"Done already, from what I've been told. I'm surprised they didn't tell you."

"They might have, but I had getting married to distract me. By the way, we're postponing a few days to allow people to mourn. It just feels wrong to throw a party the same day that people died."

"They will anyway, Mister Potter, but I understand your reasoning."

"As for the Minister, I'll probably throw my support behind just about anyone that you choose. My thoughts are on Mister Weasley or you, simply because I've gotten a good feel for how honest the both of you are."

"What if we came up with a candidate that both Arthur and I approve of? Would you throw your support behind him?" She had a suspicious twinkle in her eyes.

"Most likely. Who were you thinking of?"

"We were thinking of asking Harry James Potter to run for Minister for Magic," she replied, grinning.

He blinked at her for a long moment, before bursting into raucous laughter. "Now *that* was a good one!" he finally gasped out. "For a moment, you had me believing that you wanted a student not yet out of Hogwarts to be Minister for Magic!"

He looked in their eyes after a moment, and then backed up. "Are you out of your fucking minds?!?" he shouted. "I'm sorry for the language, but ... I'm barely sixteen! Who in their right mind is going to vote for me?"

He was nearly deafened by the crowd shouting variations on "Me!"

Turning to face the crowd, he asked, "How many of you would end up voting for me only because I just killed Voldemort up the hill a ways?" Quite a few nodded. "Are you aware of just how corrupt a government you could get if you voted that way? You have no idea what I'm like! I may be waiting for a chance to fleece everyone and

their kneazle. Vote for someone you think will do a good job, not someone who just rid you of a problem."

Hermione spoke up. "How about voting for someone who works hard to keep his promises? Someone who wants to improve relations with the non-human races in hopes of avoiding another Goblin war, or starting a Centaur war? Would you recommend voting for someone with principles such as those? A man who would work hard to make sure another Voldemort won't happen?"

"Do you want me to run, Hermione?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, I do, Harry. You could make a great difference in office."

He looked at her for a long moment. "I still think the idea of a sixteen year old Minister not even out of Hogwarts is ridiculous, but if you and the Weasleys think that I would do a good job as Minister, then I'll run." He chuckled for a moment. "I can see me now, explaining to the Bulgarian ambassador, 'Excuse me, sir, but I can't have that international policy meeting with you right now. I have finals that I have to take.'" He turned back to the crowd. "Because my wife and the Weasleys think it's a good idea, you have your candidate."

He was assaulted by the sound of cheering.

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He finally made it to the Hospital Wing to visit the wounded. As with the death toll, the number of seriously wounded was surprisingly low, and those had been moved to St. Mungo's. Everyone else seemed to be walking around the school sporting various bandages. He found Professor Dumbledore lying comfortably in one of the beds - the one that Madam Pomfrey had continually joked that she would install a plaque on to mark as *his* bed.

"Sir? How are you feeling?"

The headmaster looked up at him. "Well, other than a case of extreme exhaustion, I feel quite fine, especially knowing that the menace of Riddle is gone. Thank you, my boy." He smiled. "So how does it feel to be the most powerful wizard alive?"

"Isn't that your title, sir?" he asked.

"Not since last Thursday, Harry. You see, a person's magical core is like a muscle. The more it's exercised, the stronger it gets. With most people, it increases strength rapidly through childhood and then much more slowly after adulthood is reached. In your case, however, you had a link with Voldemort — your magic as a child was just enough to keep him alive. The older you grew, stronger your magic became — but there was always a large portion of it drained off to Voldemort. That there was still enough left for you that we didn't notice a deficiency spoke volumes for the strength you were developing. What we saw was a young man of somewhat above average power. But it is apparent now that that was perhaps only a third of what you were capable of. When Severus broke the bond between you and your wife, he also unknowingly severed the link with Voldemort, and all the power that he had been bleeding from you for years became yours again. Then with the reinstatement of the soul bond, your power increased again. Given your age, it is entirely possible your full potential has not yet been reached." He paused for just a moment. "I have heard a preliminary report from the Aurors that those three you Transfigured on the lawn will be making their home in a zoo. They say that there is no sign that they were ever human - it is as if they were *always* a hippopotamus, a giraffe, and an aardvark. That is heretofore unheard of."

Harry sat down heavily. "If they weren't Death Eaters, I'd feel horrible right now. I need to get this under control, though. I don't want to get angry at someone and accidentally turn them into a penguin or something."

Dumbledore laughed. "I think that there is little real worry about that, Harry. The most important thing you need worry about is control, and you can be forgiven for losing your temper and control in the midst of a battle with a man who desired your death. I shall work with you, however, to cement your control, if you desire."

Harry nodded, and sat with Dumbledore for a little while longer, simply visiting and enjoying the man's presence, knowing that, for once, there was nothing potentially fatal hanging over his head waiting to happen.

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Harry had rather handily avoided the worst of the mail problem simply by giving an interview to the *Daily Prophet* informing them that *all* his mail was being checked, since it was possible that some Death Eaters had survived. This meant that every owl post sent would be subjected to scrutiny, and the likelihood of certain types of letters reaching him was effectively nil. "The only knickers and bras I want in my hands are yours, preferably while you're still in them," he'd murmured to Hermione and wiggled his eyebrows at her, causing her to giggle - something her classmates were still not quite used to hearing her do.

The wedding had been not only been rescheduled as far as date was concerned, changing it to the twenty-eighth of September, but when it was realised that this was going to be the wedding of the century, it was decided that it would be moved out to the lawn. A large number of weather divination spells had been done, and all had agreed that the day would be beautiful - warmer than the end of September had a right to be.

Albus met Harry in the front hall. Hermione and her parents were secreted in the anteroom the First Years used before sorting, Harry's groomsmen stood with him looking nervous, and the bridesmaids were dashing back and forth between the two. Albus had a serene smile on his face. "I can't tell you how glad I am that this day has come, Harry. Not only do I get to see a young man I care for deeply achieve the happiness he deserves, but for once I know the public has done the correct thing as well. It is good to see that the world will be in such capable hands," he said simply.

"I still can't believe the vote went the way it did, sir. It was approved by the Wizengamot unanimously?"

Dumbledore chuckled quietly. "You were a popular candidate, Harry. I can't help but think that people will be surprised when they discover that you are not as easily controlled as they might have hoped for."

"I aim to please," Harry laughed quietly back at him. "I think the girls are about ready. Shall we start the show?"

Out on the lawn, the guests, including every student at Hogwarts, every Auror who wasn't absolutely needed elsewhere, and numerous foreign dignitaries who wanted to start off on the right foot with the young Minister, waited impatiently. An aisle extended from the doors of Hogwarts between rows of beribboned seats to a gazebo twined with climbing roses in full bloom. Soft music had been playing for the past hour. Suddenly the music changed to a stronger, more masculine theme, and as the guests turned in their seats, the great doors of the castle opened to reveal Albus Dumbledore, clad in deep purple robes that were even more resplendent than usual. He had gone all out with ceremonial regalia, wearing a plum-coloured sash that marked him as the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, his Order of Merlin First Class on a red and gold ribbon, and a large gold phoenix pendant signifying the leadership of the Order of the Phoenix. He also carried the staff of the Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, and Fawkes perched on his shoulder. In solitary majesty, he walked down the aisle to the gazebo, where he turned to face the castle.

The music changed again, to a theme of victory and triumph. In the open doorway, Harry appeared, flanked by Molly and Arthur Weasley, who had been overjoyed to be asked to stand in for Harry's parents. The Weasley's matching deep green dress robes were embroidered with gold in a design of flowering vines. After the battle, Harry had rethought his own wedding clothing choices, and combined both Muggle and Wizarding traditions, wearing a black tuxedo with a royal blue cummerbund, topped with a loose white open front robe embroidered with blue and gold phoenixes. The medallion of the Minister of Magic on its heavy gold chain completed the ensemble. Thoroughly embarrassed by all the attention, Harry was grateful for the presence of the Weasleys, which, he thought, was all that kept him from turning tail and fleeing in panic instead of walking calmly and sedately toward the gazebo.

Unlike a Muggle wedding, the parents of the bride and groom remained part of the wedding party, so Molly and Arthur waited with Harry as the music changed again.

Next up the long aisle were Ron and Ginny, her royal blue gown shimmering gently in the September sun. He saw quite a few of his

fellow students look at her with new appreciation, and was more than a little amused to note how many of them were female. Ron was quite possibly the most serious that Harry had ever seen him - he obviously took his position as groomsman quite seriously.

Then came Remus and Helen, also magnificent in their outfits. Harry smiled at the glow on his mother-in-law's face, and chuckled as he realised that it wasn't simply due to her pregnancy or the wedding that was about to happen.

Tonks and Neville followed, Neville looking fully the part of the groom himself - tall, proud, and self-assured, especially with the beautiful woman on his arm. Tonks' current form was astonishingly beautiful, with platinum blonde hair that fell to her mid-back. The manner in which the two carried themselves had Harry smiling - if he didn't know better, he'd think that this was *their* wedding.

As they took their respective places at the front, the world went away, as far as Harry was concerned. The music changed again, this time to something lush with strings and terribly romantic — Harry had heard it before but couldn't identify it. Framed in the castle doorway was Hermione in her gown, holding a bouquet of mixed magical and Muggle flowers, her father beside her in tux and robe, but she was all that he could see. The gown was ecru in colour, with gold and silver sparkles scattered across the tight bodice and full skirt. A roll of white silk bounced down the castle steps and unwound along the aisle to end right in front of the gazebo, and Harry stepped onto his end to await his bride as she approached on her father's arm. When she got closer, he finally saw what the silver and gold highlights were — small stylised phoenixes that flew gently and joyously about the gown. Her veil was silvery, and Harry smiled as he felt her excitement. Concentrating, he could feel her heart pounding as hard as his was. *My God, I love you*, he sent gently through the link. He could feel her blush.

Me too, Harry. I can't wait for the ceremony to be over, and for us to be husband and wife in the eyes of the law as well as the eyes of the gods. My heart is beating so hard - I'm scared, and happy, and ... and horny, and ...

I know. I'm the same, to all of it. I'm terrified I won't be a good husband, I'm ecstatic that the most beautiful woman I've ever known loves me, I want to shag that same woman until neither of us can walk ... He grinned widely, knowing people would misunderstand why he was grinning.

She came to a stop next to him. *Careful about telling me things like that, or else we'll consummate it before we're actually married,* she laughed in his head.

I'm trying to find a reason why that's a bad thing, he responded, feeling her blush as he did. He also felt the heat rush through her, and knew full well that they'd be sneaking off during the cocktail hour. *Might be a bad idea to dance with Professor McGonagall while sporting the raging hard-on you caused.*

She'd certainly appreciate the sentiment, came the laughing mental response. *Hold that thought for a minute, I have to pretend I'm still Daddy's little girl for a minute...*

With trembling hands, Doug carefully lifted the veil that covered her face and pulled it back, then kissed his daughter gently and carefully, then turned to shake Harry's hand solemnly. "Take care of my baby for me," he said.

"I will, sir," Harry replied. Hermione handed off her bouquet to Ginny, and Doug carefully placed Hermione's hand in Harry's, then stepping to his place with the rest of the wedding party.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, and the crowd immediately became silent. "Welcome, all, to the ceremony that will unite Harry Potter and Hermione Granger in marriage. We gather here today to celebrate their union, and to honour their commitment to not just gazing at one another, but to looking outward together in the same direction. Today Harry and Hermione proclaim their love to the world, and we rejoice with and for them."

"In marriage, we give ourselves freely and generously into the hands of the one we love, and in doing so, each of us receives the love and trust of the other as our most precious gift. But even as that gift is shared by two people who are in love, it also touches the friends and

family members who in various ways support and contribute to the relationship. All of you are Harry and Hermione's community, and each of you has played some part in bringing them to this moment. This is why gathering as a community is such an important part of a wedding ceremony. Because Harry and Hermione are now taking a new form as a married couple, and in this form, they become part of their community in a new way."

"There are many things that I could say about them, but the simplest is that I always knew that someday this would happen. I had always hoped that I would be permitted to officiate at their wedding, and they have granted an old man his fondest wish."

"Harry and Hermione, we are here to remember and rejoice with you and to recount with one another that it is love that guides us on our path, and to celebrate as you begin this journey together. It is in this spirit that you have come here to today to exchange these vows."

He turned to Harry and spoke. "Harry, repeat after me: I, Harry, take you, Hermione, to be my wife. I promise above all else to live in truth with you and to communicate fully and fearlessly. I give you my hand and my heart as a sanctuary of warmth and peace and pledge my love, devotion, faith and honour as I join my life to yours."

Harry turned to her and look at her through her veil, pouring all his feelings of love and devotion as he spoke. "I, Harry, take you, Hermione, to be my wife. I promise above all else to live in truth with you and to communicate fully and fearlessly. I give you my hand and my heart as a sanctuary of warmth and peace and pledge my love, devotion, faith and honour as I join my life to yours, until my life shall end."

She gasped at the addition, and a small sob of happiness escaped her as once again a pulse of magic burst from him. Albus Dumbledore's eyes were suspiciously bright as he turned to her and said, "Hermione, repeat after me: I, Hermione, take you, Harry, to be my husband. I promise above all else to live in truth with you, and to communicate fully and fearlessly. I give you my hand and my heart as a sanctuary of warmth and peace and pledge my love, devotion, faith and honour as I join my life to yours."

Harry could see her close her eyes for a moment, and then she spoke as she opened them. "I, Hermione, take you, Harry, to be my husband. I promise above all else to live in truth with you, and to communicate fully and fearlessly. I give you my hand and my heart as a sanctuary of warmth and peace and pledge my love, devotion, faith and honour as I join my life to yours, until my own life is done." A burst of magic exploded outward, joining Harry's magic to Hermione's, and then pulsing powerfully into the crowd.

Even though the emotion was true and powerful, they were forced to hold back laughter when they heard Hagrid's trumpet blast as he blew his nose. "I always knew they'd marry," they heard his booming whisper.

Knowing that he'd be embarrassed if they acknowledged that they'd heard him, they softly motioned to Dumbledore to continue.

"For thousands of years lovers have exchanged rings as a token of their vows. These simple gold bands are not of great value in themselves, but are made precious by our wearing of them. Your rings say that even in your uniqueness you have chosen to be bound together. Let these rings also be a sign that love has substance as well as soul, a present as well as a past, and that, despite its occasional sorrows, love is a circle of happiness, wonder, and delight."

"Harry, take Hermione's ring and put it on her finger, and repeat after me: Just as this circle is without end, my love for you is eternal. Just as it is made of indestructible substance, my commitment to you will never fail. With this ring I take you to be my trusted confidante and partner for life."

Harry turned to Ron, who handed him the gold band with a solemnity that surprised Harry. He noted the suspicious wetness in the corners of his best friend's eyes, and found that his own were suspiciously damp. "Just as this circle is without end, my love for you is eternal. Just as it is made of indestructible substance, my commitment to you will never fail. With this ring I take you to be my trusted confidante and partner for life." He brought the ring to his lips

and kissed it before taking her hand and sliding it onto her finger, where it resized gently to fit perfectly.

Dumbledore cleared his throat, sounding suspiciously as if he were fighting back tears of his own. "Hermione, take Harry's ring and put it on his finger, and repeat after me: Just as this circle is without end, my love for you is eternal. Just as it is made of indestructible substance, my commitment to you will never fail. With this ring I take you to be my trusted confidante and partner for life."

Hermione received Harry's ring with equal solemnity and spoke. "Just as this circle is without end, my love for you is eternal. Just as it is made of indestructible substance, my commitment to you will never fail. With this ring I take you to be my trusted confidante and partner for life." She also kissed the ring gently before placing it on her husband's hand.

As Harry's ring slid into place, Albus motioned, and two roses appeared hovering before the couple. "Please take one," he said with a smile. As they did, he continued. "Harry, Hermione - your gift to each other for your wedding today has been your wedding rings - which shall always be an outward demonstration of your vows of love and respect; and a public showing of your commitment to each other."

"You now have what remains the most honourable title which may exist between a man and a woman - the title of 'husband' and 'wife.' In the past, the rose was considered a symbol of love and a single rose always meant only one thing - it meant the words 'I love you.' So it is appropriate that for your first gift - as husband and wife - that gift would be a single rose."

"Please exchange your gifts." They each kissed their rose lightly and handed it to their life partner. "In some ways it seems like you have not done anything at all. Just a moment ago you were holding one small rose - and now you are holding one small rose. In some ways, a marriage ceremony is like this. In some ways, tomorrow is going to seem no different than yesterday. But in fact today, just now, you both have given and received one of the most valuable and precious

gifts of life - one I hope you always remember - the gift of true and abiding love within the devotion of marriage."

His face became quite serious, but his eyes continued to twinkle. "Harry and Hermione, I would ask that where ever you make your home in the future - whether it be a large and elegant home - or a small and graceful one - that you both pick one very special location for roses; so that on each anniversary of this truly wonderful occasion you both may take a rose to that spot both as a recommitment to your marriage - and a recommitment that *this* will be a marriage based upon love."

"Unfortunately, in every marriage there are times where it is difficult to find the right words. It is easiest to hurt who we most love. It is easiest to be most hurt by who we most love. It might be difficult at some time to words to say 'I am sorry' or 'I forgive you'; 'I need you' or 'I am hurting'." Hermione's eyes met and held Harry's for a moment, and he nodded sincerely. "If this should happen, if you simply can not find these words, leave a rose at that spot which both of you have selected - for that rose than says what matters most of all and should overpower all other things and all other words."

"That rose says the words: 'I still love you.' The other should accept this rose for the words which can not be found, and remember the love and hope that you both share today."

Albus beamed brightly again. "Harry, Hermione, if there is anything you remember of this marriage ceremony, it is that it was love that brought you here today, it is only love which can make it a glorious union, and it is love by which your marriage shall endure. From what I have seen of in the past, I have no doubt that yours is a love that will become legend." With a twinkle, he conjured a crystal bud vase into which Harry and Hermione placed their roses, and then wafted the vase over to Ginny, who plucked it gently out of the air.

He reached out his hands and laid a hand on their shoulders. "Although I am officiating here today, it is not truly in my power to sanctify, legitimise or bless your relationship in any way, because the two of you have already done that in your hearts." His hands came down to theirs, bringing them together in a tender clasp

and then releasing them to hold each other. "So, by joining hands right now and looking into each other's eyes, let it be known that you are joined, body and soul in this lifetime, and that this bond is sacred and eternal. And now that you have stood before me and exchanged these rings and these vows, and have agreed to be married according to the laws of both the Muggle realm of Scotland and the laws of the wizarding world, it gives me great pleasure to pronounce that you are Husband and Wife."

"Before I present you to the world as such, I would like to give one final blessing to you. It comes from the American Indian tribe known as the Apache, and it is their wedding chant."

"Now you will feel no rain, for each of you will be shelter for the other."

"Now you will feel no cold, for each of you will be warmth for the other."

"Now you are two persons, but there is only one life inside you."

"Go now to your dwelling to enter the days of your life together."

"And may your days be good, and long upon the earth."

After a momentary pause, he said, "You may kiss your bride, Harry."

Harry looked deeply into the eyes of the woman he would spend the rest of his days with. He knew how beautiful she was to him, but suddenly, it was as if he had never seen her before. She simply glowed with happiness, her eyes shining with tears of joy. He raised his hands to gently cup her face and leaned in gently to brush her lips with a feather kiss. "I love you, Hermione," he breathed before pressing his lips far more firmly against hers, kissing her thoroughly. His right hand released her face and slid down behind her back to pull her close while his left arm went lightly around her shoulder. The kiss deepened as both poured their feelings into it.

It was only when they heard a trilling sound that they finally broke the kiss. Fawkes spread his wings and launched himself to sit on the top of the gazebo, singing joyously. Finishing his song, he leapt into the

air again and circled above them before flashing away in a burst of golden flames.

"You are truly blessed, to have had a phoenix bless your union," Albus said. "I have but one thing to say now. Ladies and gentlemen, I have the very great honour to introduce to you Mister and Mrs. Harry Potter!"

The applause was thunderous and lasted for a good five minutes, even after they had walked back down the aisle to the strains of the Wedding March. They spent roughly forty minutes getting some photographs taken for posterity, including some Muggle ones so the Grangers would have something to show their friends and family, and then all headed toward the Quidditch pitch, the only place large enough to host the entire crowd staying for the reception. As they headed that way, Harry met Albus's eyes, and the headmaster's twinkle could almost have lit the school by itself.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he said after casting a *Sonorus* upon himself. "I would like to draw your attention to the work that has been done today ..." Harry tuned him out as he carefully made sure he was holding Hermione's hand, and then they were suddenly elsewhere on the grounds - on the cliffs, in a delightfully secluded spot.

"Why, Mister Potter!" she said, pretending to be scandalised. "Whatever are you thinking? Were you thinking of getting me alone to ravish my body?"

"I believe that the proper answer to that question is a very fervent 'Hell yes!', " he laughed.

"Well, then, carry on," she giggled, relaxing into his arms.

He kissed her deeply again, and breathed, "How is it that, even after making love to you before, even to the point of fathering a child, I am terrified of this moment - of not pleasing you as a man should his wife?"

She smiled and nestled against his shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Harry. Just knowing that you worry about it pleases me. You

care. And considering how incredibly you treated me on the day you gave me your virginity, I doubt that you'll be any less wonderful." Her eyes sparkled. "Especially after everything we've learned since your birthday," she finished in a purr that caused a rather insistent throbbing to develop below his waist. "Oh, for me?" she asked innocently as she pressed against his groin.

"You're trying to kill me, aren't you?" he asked as her hand slid down and began caressing him through the fabric of his trousers. "Make sure that no ... oh God yes ... no blood gets to my brain?"

"Harry, for once, I want you to think with this head," she growled, squeezing his length for just a moment. An instant later, she found her hand wrapped around skin.

Harry blinked as he realised that their clothes were nicely folded off to the side, and then groaned as he felt Hermione's grip tighten slightly, her hand beginning to gently stroke up and down. "Do you have any idea how difficult it is to keep from grabbing you and just plunging into you when you're doing that to me?"

"What are you waiting for?" she moaned back. "I've wanted to be with you since I woke up this morning."

A moment later, she had her back against a cushioned tree, her legs wrapped around Harry's waist, and Harry was delighting in the feel of his wife surrounding him. Almost immediately, the feedback from their link overloaded them both, and they were crying each other's names in joy as they stopped being separate souls for a few moments.

As they came to their senses, Hermione smiled. "Now we are well and truly married, lover boy. Gods, I've needed that since I awoke this morning to hear Mum and Dad in their own room. I had to clamp down on the link to allow you to function this morning - otherwise you'd have grabbed me and screwed me senseless the moment you saw me in the aisle."

"Well, I wanted to anyway ..." he began before breaking into laughter.

"I know, I could feel that. I was at *that* level when I woke up, though. I was in serious need of that shagging you just gave me, Mister Potter." She relaxed against him.

He kissed her forehead gently. "Well, Mrs. Potter, I am to please."

With a growl that made him start to stiffen again, she replied, "Well, I can tell you that it was definitely pleasing." She pulled herself from his embrace and laid down on the grass. "Care to take the edge off a bit more before we return to the crowd? Perhaps something less frantic for both of us?" He opened his mouth, but she cut him off. "Don't apologize - we were both horny as hell. If not for your magic, we'd be casting repair spells on our clothes, because I was going to tear my dress off to let you have your way with me."

"That dress is too beautiful to do that to," he murmured as he nibbled on her neck. "Now be quiet while I kiss everything that I love to kiss so much."

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They returned to the party after that, feeling quite happy, and no one who noticed that they had disappeared asked where they had been. They were led to the head table that had been set up, and almost immediately someone in the crowd began striking a utensil against their goblet, the sound chiming clearly through the gathering. Hermione's eyes sparkled and she leaned over to Harry. "They'll keep ringing until we kiss, Harry," she murmured.

His own eyes lit up and he captured her lips in a gentle kiss. As it broke, he grinned and his salad fork rose to begin softly striking the side of his own goblet. She smiled and kissed him back.

After several more kisses and some laughter through the crowd at their antics, the toast came. Ron stood and said, "Just ask any of the teachers here at Hogwarts and they'll agree that I'm not well known as a public speaker." This received some laughter, and he continued. "I went through so much trying to figure out exactly what to say about these two, and nothing was right. All I can say is that I am proud that they think enough of me to call me their friend ..."

"... funny, we were thinking something similar," Harry murmured, somehow loud enough for all to hear. "How were we lucky enough to have someone like you end up as our friend?"

"Thank you," Ron said. "What I really came down to with my remarks here, though, was realising that I could start to make plans for their one hundredth anniversary celebration. If there were ever two people literally made for each other, it's these two. To my friends - Mr. and Mrs. Potter. Long may they live and love!" This was met with a loud cheer, and an emptying of glasses.

The party truly got started then, and the next several hours were a blur. Harry could only remember a handful of things - seeing Albus and Minerva out on the dance floor as if they were meant to be together; seeing Luna, Ron, and Parvati in the midst of an interesting three person waltz; seeing Susan Bones and Ginny dancing together and realising that they only had eyes for each other; and most of all, the speculative looks on the faces of the two who caught the bouquet and garter - Tonks and Remus.

Finally, Harry and Hermione dragged into their quarters sometime near midnight, Harry carefully carrying her across the threshold before setting her down. "I love you, Mrs. Potter," he said tiredly.

"And I love you, Mr. Potter," she murmured back at him. They carefully undressed and hung their wedding clothes. Neither could remember actually climbing into bed the next morning.

Epilogue

Harry had been Minister for Magic for two weeks when he heard an odd noise one night outside the school. It sounded as if someone were screaming, but it wasn't terror. It sounded ... joyful?

He looked out the window and cast a spell that sharpened his vision. His next reaction was to open the link to Hermione. "Damn," she breathed. "We all thought he was sexy back in third year, but ... wow ... I wonder if that's a side effect of his lycanthropy?"

Um, Hermione? It's a full moon out there at this very second. We have our old defense teacher bouncing around the lawn in a naked condition - as a human. How in hell did that happen?

Maybe we should go out and ask him?

You just want to get near him while he's naked and see if he reacts, don't you? he teased her. I'm hurt. Thrown over for a debonair, charming, and extremely well-hung werewolf. Well, ex-werewolf.

She laughed and put her arms around him from behind. "Shall we go bring him a robe?" she asked. Harry laughed and threw his own robes on, grabbing another to give to Remus. Hermione headed off to the Headmaster's office to talk to him.

"Hey, Remus!" Harry yelled as he got close to the man a short time later. "Got something here for you!"

Remus turned to see Harry and ran at him. "I'm cured!" he shouted. "I don't know how, but I'm cured!" He grabbed Harry in a hug.

"You're also naked," Harry laughed. "I brought you a robe until you can get your own clothes. If I don't, every fifth year and above is going to end up with a view that I'm not sure you want them to have. You'd probably end up with a few proposals of marriage from the seventh year girls, though." Harry grinned evilly.

Remus chuckled, blushing. "Sirius would have loved to make fun of me for this."

"I just want you covered so that I don't feel inadequate," Harry responded dead-pan.

"Trust me, Minister, you have no need to feel inadequate," came a voice so sultry that Harry felt the blood leave his brain.

"Hermione, why must you do that to me? Now we have to find the nearest broom closet!"

"Good," she laughed quietly. "We haven't christened them all yet."

Albus Dumbledore laughed quietly. "Perhaps we should take this conversation inside?"

#####

Once in the Headmaster's office, the four sat for a time, sipping tea. Harry reached out and popped a sherbet lemon into his mouth, which brought a smile to Albus's face. "You're the first to take one in many years, Harry."

"This is one of the few times when I don't feel like I'm in trouble. My stomach isn't usually too happy with me when I've had to be here before. I'm not really in the mood for a sherbet lemon then."

Albus nodded. "Understandable." Finally, he turned to Remus. "Well, it looks as if something needs to be removed from your résumé, Remus."

"I don't know how, but I suspect that Harry had something to do with it. How do I thank you?"

Harry met Hermione's eyes for just a second, and she nodded. No actual conversation took place, even mentally. "Well, you could probably do it by agreeing to be the godfather of our son."

"Are you sure?" Remus asked, flabbergasted.

"Of course we are, silly!" Hermione said. "Our little boy is going to need someone to teach him how to be a proper Marauder and how to cover his tracks," she added with a wink to the headmaster.

"Oh dear, I shall have to have Poppy examine me. My hearing seems to disappear at the most inopportune moments," he said with a wide grin.

Harry thought for a moment before changing the subject completely. "Sir ..."

"Minister?" Dumbledore responded with a twinkling smile.

"Very well. *Albus*. I know it's only been a few weeks, but has anyone figured out, or got any ideas as to what made that Avada simply rebound off my wife? I'm not complaining," he added, starting to tear up unintentionally at the thought of what he had almost lost. "I'm just curious."

"We may never know," Albus responded, "but the leading thoughts on the matter involve an odd confluence of the *Conceptigenus Puer*, the blessings that both of your parents placed upon you, and the fact of the soul bonding. Separately, none of them would have had the power, but it is my belief that between them all, there was enough to throw off the curse." He paused and laughed. "Even deities have been drawn into the possibilities for explanations, explaining why both Helen and Hermione were impregnated by you. The person who suggested that is aware that even contemplating testing such a theory would be excessively bad for his continued existence above ground, but he theorises that something similar would have happened if Helen had been the target, because you, her daughter and her husband would all have been willing to jump in the way, much as Helen, you and Doug would have been willing to leap in front of Hermione. One theory suggests that the baby may well have had an effect on the curse, sending it back, considering that the child *is* the child of the most powerful wizard and witch in existence." He paused. "Amusingly enough, this theory would also have saved Helen's life as well, for the same reasoning, at least as far as the most powerful wizard is concerned. Expect your children to be intriguing, Harry."

"Any other theories?" Remus asked.

"Many, but the only other one that I lend any credence to is the one that states that the *Conceptigenus Puer* combined with the soul bond and the protections that both of Harry's parents placed on him caused the curse to mutate and bounce. I honestly doubt that we will ever know."

"Not like we could test it," Harry said. "Or that I'd let anyone survive the attempts to test it, since it would require a minimum of two murders."

Hermione caught something that Albus had said. "Most powerful?" she asked.

"Harry has shown greater power than anything Merlin ever did during those tests we have run with your bond suppressed. You are extremely close to his level. When the bond is active?" He chuckled. "Mister Weasley may have understated things. I would not be surprised if you both were capable of celebrating your two hundredth wedding anniversary still being quite agile and spry."

"Good heavens," Hermione breathed, and Harry chuckled at the quick thought that he picked up from her mind - the sex from two hundred years of study of the subject would be intense, to say the very least.

And you say that I have a one track mind, he laughed at her.

Well, I must have gotten some of your sex drive with the bond, she thought primly, knowing that he could read otherwise.

If that were the case, beautiful, then why aren't you walking into classes every day with your feet a yard apart? If we were sharing a sex drive as well, we'd never get to classes. He laughed out loud, and she did as well.

"I won't pretend to understand why you're laughing," Remus said with a smile.

"My wife is pregnant, and has a sex drive. Let's leave it at that," Harry said, grinning, making Hermione blush.

"Reminds me of some of the stories you parents *didn't* tell me when Lily was pregnant with you, if you get my meaning," Remus laughed. "Showing up at all hours and finding them rumpled with certain scents hanging in the air ... well, you can guess what they were doing."

"Practicing for the next ones?" Harry asked with a laugh.

Remus laughed as well before finally settling down. "It's good to hear you speak of it without getting depressed, Harry."

"Well, now that I have my own child on the way -"

"Children," Hermione corrected quietly. "A son and a daughter. Poppy told me just yesterday at my last check-up."

"Twins?" Harry asked, his face brightening even more. "How is that possible? *Conceptigenus Puer* should only have caused a son!"

Hermione was glowing at the feeling of barely contained happiness at the thought of another child. "We don't know, but it may connect back to the same reason that there's an aardvark, a hippopotamus and a giraffe gracing a local zoo. Also the reason that Remus is no longer a werewolf. You were doing it most strongly immediately after the battle, but you still are having odd little effects that by all rights shouldn't happen magically. I think that you subconsciously thought about consummating the marriage, and since some children are conceived on the wedding night, I think you made one of my eggs receptive and in the right place at the right time. You did things with magic that simply aren't possible by our current understanding, love."

"I'm ... wow. I was happy enough with one, but two? Twins?" He stood and did a little jig, drawing Hermione to her feet and dancing with her. The aura of happiness was palpable in the office, and Remus and Albus got to their feet and joined Harry in the dancing.

Finally everyone calmed down and sat again. Remus spoke. "I have no idea what to do now. I'll be able to work a normal job, but who'd hire a known werewolf? Well, ex-werewolf."

Harry grinned in response. "I can think of one person who'd hire you in a heartbeat."

"Who?" Remus asked.

"Me. I need an advisor who isn't afraid to kick me in the arse when I need it. Someone that I trust to bounce ideas off. Someone I can ask to talk to the other werewolves. I'll be getting rid of those werewolf control laws pretty soon, but we need to set up a board to figure out what to do with them."

"How do you mean 'what to do with them'?" Remus asked a little warily.

"Sorry, bad phrasing. We do need to figure where best their existing talents lie. Like you, they're mages and whatnot. They need training in a lot of things, especially since it was unusual for one to come to Hogwarts, and they need to be able to work. Find something to do, and make sure that they've got the days around the full moons off. Fairly simple sounding, really, but a hell of a lot harder to pull off in real life." He paused. "Will you do it? Will you hire on as my advisor?"

"I don't know much about it, to be honest."

"I've got someone set up to train you before he goes to work in a different office. He asked to be relocated to the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office. I figured I'd grant Percy's request to work with his dad."

"Percy asked to be relocated elsewhere?" Remus asked incredulously.

"Yup. Realised where his prior ambitions had led him, and didn't like it. Yeah, he was high in the Ministry, but when everyone you love has trouble dealing with you, it's hard on a guy. He's currently trying to woo Penelope Clearwater again, from what I understand."

"So he is out of St. Mungo's?" Hermione asked.

"Actually, no. We've been talking by owl, and during my daily visits to London." He looked to Dumbledore. "Sorry for the disruption of the school day, sir."

"When one is teaching the Minister for Magic, one does what is necessary," Albus replied with a chuckle. "The disruption is not that great, and since you and your wife take the same classes, it works quite well for you both. She hears the lessons and leaves the link open for you to assimilate, as I understand it."

"And helps me work on it when I'm back home. Uh, here," he said with a blush. He looked at Remus. "By the way, what is your answer? Yes or no to the advisor position?"

"Isn't it nepotism?" Remus asked.

"So what? It's a time-honoured tradition in both the Muggle and wizarding worlds. I'm just going to shock people by appointing my people by competency. For example, Griselda Marchbanks is retiring in two years, just after I finish here at Hogwarts. I've already chosen her successor, if the person I'm thinking of is interested."

"Really?" Hermione asked. "Who? That is a very important job, because all the *real* educational decrees go through her office."

"What would you think of my asking one Hermione Potter to take the job when she finishes school then?" he asked with a cheeky grin.

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Are you serious? Me, in charge of that office?" She stopped to think for a moment, and then grinned evilly. "Wouldn't that put a bee in so many pureblood family bonnets?"

"Yes it would." He looked back to Remus. "We've managed to skirt around it a number of times now. Can I assume that you'd prefer the job go to someone else?"

Remus blinked. Harry was acting a great deal more forcefully than he could ever remember him being before. "I'm sorry. We got off on

tangents. I want the job, but ... well, with my life prior to this, I think you can see where I'm heading with this. If you're serious about it, then I'll take it." He held out his hand to Harry.

"Excellent. I was going to offer it to you anyway, but now that you're no longer eligible for our children to call you Uncle Woofie, it'll make it that much easier to get you the job. I'd have forced it anyway, but now I don't have to burn so much of my fame up." He yawned widely. "Oh goodness. I think we need to get back to bed and get a little sleep." He punctuated the comment with another very wide yawn.

"Agreed," Hermione said with a quiet purr. "Let's go, honey."

Despite his words, they didn't get to sleep for a while.

#####

The rest of the year passed fairly uneventfully, with the only big shock being when Millicent Bulstrode and Pansy Parkinson came out as a lesbian couple, and any potential problems that might have developed were nipped in the bud by Harry greeting them as such with no fanfare - he simply treated it as a fact of life. He had developed something of a friendship with Millicent after the battle, and had apologised publicly for some of the things he had said about her, both public and private. She had been forgiving, and had introduced him to the real Pansy, not the one who had felt that she would have to marry Draco.

The trials of Draco, Dolores Umbridge and Cornelius Fudge were widely attended, and many were shocked that Harry had not gone to any of them, except to be a witness. All three trials had taken some time to go through, since Harry had insisted that they be scrupulously fair, and had set Amelia Bones to ensure that.

Umbridge's trial was the shortest, lasting only three days before it went for a verdict. She was convicted of fraud, having become involved in the funding schemes that Lucius Malfoy had begun. She was also convicted of torture, abuse of minor children, and improper usage of Ministry personnel and resources. Her worst crimes were those of attempted murder and attempted use of an

Unforgivable. For these crimes, she was given a total of seven life consecutive sentences plus community service if she somehow managed to survive long enough to be released. (The community service was for the misuse of Ministry resources and personnel.)

Fudge's trial lasted a month, once all the fraud he had committed over the years was discovered. His trial covered all of it that they had found enough proof with which to prosecute him, and his fortune was stripped and given to those he had defrauded. He also was given 2,597 consecutive ten year sentences for fraud - one for every count he was found guilty of. His body was found hanging from the rafters of his cell in Azkaban three days after he began his sentence.

Draco was sentenced as a Death Eater, and his pleas that he had been under the *Imperius* were tested thoroughly and found to be false. He was sentenced to be executed, and was beheaded two days later. Harry refused to use the Veil as an execution method, because he still felt that something might be done to at least rescue Sirius' body from the other side.

One trial that happened that had an attendance that dwarfed the other three trials combined was the trial of Severus Snape. Harry was unable to avoid this one, since he was the one who had brought the case to trial. While the insult to Hermione was satisfied by the duel that they had fought, there was the attack on Harry and Hermione that needed too be dealt with. When word came out that Severus Snape was to go on trial, many others came forward with requests to sue him for mental torture of students. During the trial, even current and older Slytherin students stepped forward and spoke of his prejudices.

What surprised people during the trial of Severus Snape was when someone attempted to bring forth his Death Eater past, and Harry and Minister put his foot down. "Unless someone has incontrovertible proof that he was more than a spy within Riddle's forces, I don't want to hear anything about that during this trial. Suspicions are *not* to be used. Bringing forward his allegiances during the first war is nothing more than a tactic to win at all costs. I want this to be a *fair* trial."

"Mister Potter, do you have any opinions on the allegations?"

"Yes, I do. My opinion is my own."

The trial continued, with an eventual sentence of twenty years, which were to be served working for St. Mungos as their Potions Master after his arm had been completely regenerated and was back to full efficacy. His freedom was to be nil - he would go from home to work and back home. With Harry's backing, it was decided that ten years would be cut from his sentence if he could develop a cure for lycanthropy, and an additional five would be removed if he were to find a way to return some of the catatonic patients to health.

Helen gave birth at the end of May, naming her children Lilianne Harriet and Juliette Minerva. Not to be outdone, Hermione gave birth in mid-June, and they named their children Cedric Douglas and Marietta Lily. No one had a problem with the tears that Cho Chang shed at hearing the names, because she certainly was not the only one.

#####

Seventh year was surprisingly uneventful for Harry, except for one Saturday in October. He had gone to the Veil to look at it and speak to Sirius as one would to a headstone. "I wish you were here, Sirius. Tom is gone, you've been pardoned, and I'm a married man. I wish you were here to meet my babies. I wish you were here to hold them and tell them all the stories about the Marauders. I wish you were here to exasperate us with your intention to be a bad example." Tears slid from his eyes and splashed to the ground unchecked.

Suddenly, the Veil moved as if in a high wind, and someone burst from it. "Harry!" bellowed a voice as a form shot out of the archway. Standing there, wand at the ready, was Sirius Black, looking no different than the day he fell through more than a year earlier.

Harry's wand was out in an instant. "Prove to me who you are," he said sharply.

Sirius blinked at him. "What happened to the fight? Where's Bella? Where are the rest? What happened to her? What are you doing standing here so calmly in the midst of a fire-fight?"

"Who are the Marauders?"

Sirius finally realised that the situation was not as he originally thought, so he calmed and answered Harry's question as he put his wand away. "Your dad, me, Remus, and the rat Pettigrew. James was Prongs, I was Padfoot, Remus was Moony, and Pettigrew was Wormtail." He shifted to his Animagus form.

Harry's response was to blink furiously for a moment before running forward and hugging Padfoot, tears flowing freely. "Oh my God, Sirius, it *is* you!" was all that he could say for several minutes. When he finally let him go, Sirius finally shifted back.

"Harry, we have to get out of here. I don't know what happened, but I can't exactly get caught, you know? Can we escape? Please?"

Harry grinned. "I can manage that. It's been a little time since you went through the Veil, so a few things have changed. I'm in my seventh year at Hogwarts. Right now, it's Saturday, October the eighteenth. Let me grab this portkey and sneak us back to my quarters at Hogwarts. There've been some changes, so don't react too oddly, okay?"

He touched the portkey, and as soon as Sirius was touching it, they disappeared to the quarters that he and Hermione had shared since the previous year. They appeared in the study, and Harry said, "Let me prepare Hermione." At the old man's raised eyebrows, he added, "One of those changes. She's my wife." Before Sirius could say anything, Harry left him in the study.

"Hermione?" he said as he exited the room. Evidence suggested that she had recently finished breast-feeding and put the children down for their naps, and he reacted as he always did.

"Can we at least wait until we're in the next term before we start the next ones, Harry? I don't fancy waddling through my NEWTs." she

said with a smile as she stood and flowed into his arms. "Don't worry, we can practice all we can manage."

"Sorry," he laughed as he gently disengaged from her. "Something has happened that has kicked in my Marauder genes, and I have an odd little prank to pull on someone. I need you to come into the study and see someone. You might want to put on a robe first, though." She absently waved for one and it flew into her hand. She slid it on as Harry got to the door. "This is what it seems, love. I'm sure of that." He opened the door and motioned her to it.

Her eyes widened as she took in the sight of the shaggy haired man and leapt at him, hugging him with a hug that would have made Molly Weasley proud. "Oh my God, Sirius! How?"

"I don't know. Bella *Stupefied* me and then I came running back through once the spell wore off. Is everything going to be okay with my being here? How am I going to sneak out without getting caught?"

"You don't need to," Harry said with a grin. "When Voldemort was finally defeated by a group of us, the Minister was more than willing to grant you your freedom posthumously, and even a Order of Merlin, First Class for your efforts in the war. After all, you could have turned your back on the wizarding world, but you fought for them anyway."

"I fought for you, Harry. You and your friends." His eyes sparkled. "See you caught yourself a babe. Married her too? And not even out of school yet? Fast worker, aren't you?"

"That reminds me," Harry laughed. "I need to introduce you to our twins, Cedric Douglas and Marietta Lily."

"I was joking, kid!" He turned and leered at Hermione. "Are the twins at least lucky enough to breast-feed?" He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

She responded by dropping the robe to the floor. "Just finished a little while ago. I'm getting comfortable again, if you don't mind, Harry." She turned and headed back into their common room.

Harry laughed as he heard Sirius chanting, "She's married; she's married; she's too young; she's married..."

"Yeah, she does have a great ass, doesn't she?" Harry asked. Sirius' look made Harry wish that the man had been drinking something right then, because he was certain that there would have been a classic spit-take.

"What was that about my perfect ass?" Hermione called from the other room with a laugh.

"Sirius was in here reminding himself that you're married," Harry called back. "Tell you what, Sirius. You go into the common area with her, and I'll contact a couple people who really need to be made aware of this, okay?" As soon as Sirius nodded and left the room, Harry knelt and activated the Floo connection to the Headmaster's office. As he stepped through, he heard Hermione say, "Don't be embarrassed, Sirius. It's a compliment ..."

"Harry!" Albus said with a start. "What brings you here without warning?"

Harry looked around to see Remus conferring with Albus, as well as Minerva McGonagall. "We need to get Tonks here as soon as we can, sir. I just portkeyed back from the Chamber with the Veil. I'm going to be pranking someone."

Remus shook his head. "Wait. What does the Veil have to do with a prank?"

"I'm pranking a man who just stepped back through it after more than a year."

All three were on their feet in an instant. "Sirius is back? Are you sure?" was the general consensus as to the questions asked.

"To my satisfaction. Right now he's in my quarters trying not to let Hermione know that her being naked in front of him is causing him some ... heh ... *Sirius* blood flow problems." He looked to Remus. "He's a boob man, isn't he? He's trying not to look at her like he wishes he was one of our children, if you catch my meaning."

Remus nodded weakly. "What's your prank?" he finally asked. When Harry explained, Remus burst out laughing, and even Minerva grinned outright.

#####

Harry returned to the study and headed out to the common room. "It's okay to look, Sirius. Wait 'til you meet her mother and father. Her mother could pass for her not-very-much older sister."

"As Lily and Juliette prove," Hermione said with an evil twinkle to her eyes. "It's a long story, and we have years to explain," she told the confused Sirius.

There was a knock at the door, and Harry headed over to it as Sirius hid from force of habit. "Harry?" Albus said. "I followed through on what you told me, and have brought Tonks and Remus here. Ronald and Ginevra also wished to come along, and I did not believe that there would be a problem with that. We are the only ones in attendance."

Sirius came out quietly from his hiding place and looked at the group in the doorway. Tonks let loose with a crying gasp and threw herself onto the ex-convict, crying incoherently with joy. Remus simply walked over and hugged the two tightly.

When they had finally parted, Ginny threw herself at Sirius and hugged him tightly. "Missed you, Padfoot. Missed you a lot." After a pause, she added, "Thanks for the compliment. If I weren't with Neville and Susan, I'd think about it." She was rewarded with a laugh and a blush from Sirius.

"The Ministry is aware of Sirius' return, as you requested," Albus said to Harry. "I was informed that the Minister has come to a decision. Since Sirius is no longer dead, what moneys are possible to be returned to him will be. You, Miss Tonks, and Mister Lupin will be returning their shares from the will, as well as whatever properties were transferred. That money that Narcissa Black was given will not be taken from her."

Sirius turned purple. "I'm gonna ... oh, Fudge is gonna pay for this one. As far as anyone could tell, I was dead, so my will was read, right?" Remus nodded, and it appeared that Sirius did not see the twinkle there. "Then the money is yours! I don't want it back!"

"Well, the Minister has decided that even if Remus and Nymph don't return theirs, I will be returning my share, especially since the title and the properties, as well as something like ninety percent of the money went to me."

"That son of a bitch won't let up on you, will he? Why should you be punished ..." He stopped in mid rant and stalked to the fireplace, grabbing the Floo powder. "Office of the Minister for Magic!" he bellowed.

Percy Weasley's face appeared in the flames. "Office of the Minister," he said officially.

"I need to speak to your boss!" Sirius said carefully.

Percy turned to the side. "Dad, it appears that the rumours are true. Sirius Black is back and is asking for you for some reason."

"Arthur?" Sirius asked. "You're the Minister?"

"No, where did you get that idea?"

"Well I called the Minister's office and got Percy and asked for the Minister, and he gave me to you."

"Actually," Percy corrected, "you asked for my boss. I work in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office now, with Dad. I'm sitting here as a favour to the Minister."

"Well, can you tell me where the bloody prick is?" Sirius asked angrily. "He's punishing Harry, Remus, and Tonks for my being alive!"

Arthur grinned widely. "You might wish to turn around then, Sirius. The Minister is in the room with you." He cut the connection suddenly.

Sirius stood and turned around, and Harry made certain that they captured the look on Sirius' face when he realised that Harry was wearing the badge of office of the Minister for Magic. "So, what is it you want to say the prick?" Harry said with a wide grin.

"How ... you ... Minister? At seventeen? While you're still in Hogwarts?"

"Sixteen, actually. I've been doing this for more than a year. Splitting time between Hogwarts and London. Hired Remus on as my advisor, and I'm grooming Griselda Marchbanks replacement."

"Is that what they're calling it these days?" Ginny asked impudently. "I can never stay up to date with the euphemisms for sex."

"Brat," Harry said with a laugh. "Now, what did you want to say to me about giving you back your money and title?"

"Harry, I left those to you!"

"And you're alive! I have more than enough from my parents, and as of thirty minutes ago, I can live up to something I've felt for a long time." He walked over and put his hands on Sirius' shoulders. "I'd give up everything you gave me just to have my godfather back. Whether or not that was an Oath, I consider it a more than fair bargain. You're back. I don't want the money. Or wait a hundred years or more and give it to your many, many, many children."

"I haven't left any behind, Harry."

"Well, it's time to play catch-up, then!" Harry replied brightly. "You're free, and we'll announce your return soon, so you'll be able to walk the streets a free man."

"Won't that be a spit in the eye of Bella and Lucius and Narcissa?"

"Trixie and Lucius the Unlucky died when their lord and master did. Narcissa, on the other hand, is somewhere on the continent, after disowning her son and *then* divorcing Lucius." He

paused. "Long story. What say we sit down and talk a while, and we can bring you up to date?"

#####

It turned out that Harry had managed to heal Doug as well, much to his and Helen's delighted surprise. Harry was unable to convince them not to name their son after him.

#####

The years passed, with Harry inadvertently making Sybill Trelawney correct a third time when Hermione gave birth to her tenth child. Fred and George gave Harry a salute that day, since he had proven himself an Honorary Weasley with that feat. (It didn't hurt that the Potters seemed somehow 'doomed' to twins at each birth.)

Ron had married Luna and both Patil girls after Hogwarts. He had been in love with all three, but didn't wish to hurt any of them, so all four were becoming rather frustrated. It took them setting up anti-Apparition wards and showing up completely nude in the Chudley Cannons locker room before he realised that they were willing to share him. They proved it immediately. Luna's first child was born nine months to the day later.

Neville had been stunned when he came across Susan and Ginny making love on his bed in his apartment, and tried to leave quietly, his heart breaking. He found it healed quite quickly when they pounced him and proved to him that the three of them could be quite happy.

Everyone was surprised the day that those three proceeded to pounce Sirius, Sirius being the most surprised. Susan was the one who provided him with a male heir to the Black family, although only days ahead of Ginny.

Tonks had to make the first move with Remus. She had to go so far as to have Hermione spell her to Remus' bed with the only release mechanism being the two of them talking out their feelings. The fact that Tonks was naked when she was tied to the bed helped Remus realise a few things. Luckily, the spell required only that they talk out their feelings, or else Tonks would have been in trouble, because

Remus' Gryffindor honour kicked in, and he refused to make love to her until their wedding night.

They weren't seen for a week.

#####

Harry's biggest surprises came after he and Hermione had been married for five years. He and Hermione were luxuriating in the sun when they received word of a Floo call from Dobby. They went to catch it and found themselves talking to Pansy and Millicent, both of whom seemed to appreciate Hermione's choice of sunbathing costume.

"Pansy! Mill!" Harry said. "What can I do for you?"

Millicent bit her lower lip. "Can we come through and talk to you? It's private, and anyone can listen in on these things."

"Come on through." A moment later the couple was standing before Harry and Hermione, both trying hard and failing in their attempt to not react to Hermione's state of undress. "So, what's up?"

"Besides my interest in screwing your wife?" Pansy murmured in a voice he was certain she thought was inaudible.

Millicent snorted. "We want your help, if you're willing. We want children, and we'd like to talk to the two of you for a very good reason." For the first time that Harry could ever remember, Millicent blushed, a surprisingly pretty sight on her.

Hermione looked at them for a long moment before chuckling. "Old fashioned or some of the new Muggle techniques?"

"What are you talking about, Hermione?" Harry asked.

"I'm asking them if they'd rather you do the sperm donation by going to a doctor's office and thinking about the implantation of a fertilised egg, or if they'd prefer a fertility potion and lying on their backs thinking of each other."

Harry's jaw dropped. "Are you serious?" he asked. Both women nodded.

"You proved why you were the best choice for so many things when you - after all the shi ... garbage we put you through in Hogwarts, you still put that behind you and treated us ... you treated us better than we deserved," Pansy said. "The way we acted toward you, no one would have blamed you if you'd taken some revenge on us."

"Well, in a way, what I was doing was - only you accepted the hand of friendship I put out, which means that revenge wasn't needed. If you hadn't been sincere, you'd have been wondering when the kick in the arse was going to come."

Pansy laughed. "That's so Slytherin!" she finally said admiringly. "You got something you wanted either way!"

"I probably would have been Slytherin if I hadn't met Hagrid and Ron, and even more importantly, Draco." Both girls nodded knowingly. "As for the answer, well, it all depends on Hermione as to whether or not I ..."

"Harry," Hermione interrupted, "I know you better than any woman on the planet. If you don't mind being the father of their children, then by all means be the donor." She kissed him. "And I'm certain we can locate a couple fertility potions."

"Hermione?" he squeaked out.

"I know you, beloved. There is no woman you will place before me. We are soul bonded, and I can feel your fear that I'll hate you for this." She smiled. "We're soul bonded, Harry. I know, beyond any shadow of doubt, that you love me. Remember, you're the man who made me able to Arithmanticly prove how much you love me. Remember that two mile diameter anti-Apparation ward? If you want to take these ladies somewhere and give them their children, then I know that you will not suddenly decide you want them more than me. I am secure in your love for me." She kissed him in a manner that certainly seemed to prepare him for the activity.

He accepted the role of godfather when their babies were born.

#####

It wasn't long after that when Hermione entered their home, eyes twinkling, having come from visiting her parents while Harry was at work. They talked quietly for a while, nuzzling at each other's neck, and generally being newlyweds. It was as she held him close to her that she said, "If you had the chance, Harry, would you make love to Mum again?"

He was embarrassed by how rapidly he stiffened against his wife. "Rhetorical question, thank God," he murmured in her ear. "I admit that you have benefited from some of their visits, so you know that I find Helen sexy."

"It wasn't rhetorical, Harry. Even though Dad is fertile again, they've been talking about more children, and specifically your children." She blushed furiously. "Apparently they've been interested in a ménage à trois for years, but the only man they've ever trusted enough is married to their daughter, and tried to kill himself when he fathered my sisters." She looked him in the eyes. "I know now how much you love me. I said it with Mill and Pansy, and I say it again - I love you, and I trust you."

"They really ... you ..." He was at a complete loss for words.

"But ... oh, we need another family meeting," he said faintly.

"Are you having trouble thinking?" she purred erotically at him. "Imagining Mum in your arms again and making her squeal?"

"Urg," he said. Hermione laughed and wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Let's work off that pressure," she said, and quickly they were making passionate love against the counter.

When he had calmed, she asked, "So, can we talk about this without losing all the blood from your brain?" She giggled as she felt him twitch against her.

"I'm sorry, love," he said seriously. "You know how much I love you, and I still remember the way I was a few years ago, but I'll admit that the concept of being in a threesome with Helen as the meat in a sandwich is extremely erotic to me. I think I fell in love with her as more than my mother-in-law."

"I know you did," Hermione said. "You're finally learning something about our family. I'm monogamous because I choose to be. I won't be involved with this, because I don't want to be involved in incest, but I'll be very hurt if you choose to close the link when you're with them."

His jaw dropped. "You actually want to feel me making love to your mother?"

"It's the closest I'll ever be to understanding how a man feels when he's inside a woman, and I'd rather it be with someone that I love as well. Mill and Pansy were both a quick fling for the right purposes. They're our friends, and we love them as such, and I know you could never lose your heart to them. You already lost your heart to Mum in so many ways, which simply proves that you're a smart man."

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Helen's next children were Harry's - twins again, named Sirius and Melody.

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By the time that Harry left the Ministry and moved into teaching, he was nearing ninety, and looked as if he were barely into his thirties. Hermione still appeared in her mid-twenties when she left the Ministry to teach as well. It was noted by this point that most of the people closest to Harry seemed to be aging slower than perhaps they normally would - even Albus was still alive and rather spry, although he had left the running of Hogwarts to Minerva years ago.

The point was driven home how young the saviours of the wizarding world were remaining when Hermione became pregnant and gave

birth on her hundredth birthday. Everyone that Harry loved survived to celebrate their hundredth wedding anniversary sixteen years later.

The world was mostly peaceful, especially after Harry made a concerted effort to blend the Muggle and wizarding worlds. He still occasionally was forced to stomp on an up and coming dark lord, but his children were enjoying getting into the act as well.

Each of those they loved were given a fond farewell as their time for the next great adventure came along, and the tears were minimal, for they knew they had lived good lives and would see each other again. When at last he and Hermione died gently in their sleep, they had both managed to surpass Nicholas Flamel by more than a hundred years, leaving behind a world that had not known war in any form for more than two hundred years.